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THE
SISTER OF MERCY.

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THE
SISTER OF MERCY.



FOR THE TIMES WE LIVE IN.

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THE SISTER OF MERCY.

CHAPTER I.

"Oh! woman, in our hours of ease."—SCOTT.

LADY TEMPEST stood on her own threshold, and leaned against her own house door, whilst the chariot containing the last of her guests rolled smoothly down the avenue. They were the stupidest of the whole set, the family she liked the least; she had grumbled at their coming, and yawned over their prolonged stay, but they were the last remnants of such a merry party, and now she was left alone. She waved her handkerchief as they turned the corner, and betook herself to the doleful, vacant draw-

ing-room. There was the piano open; the chairs all strewed with music, results of the final search in which every one had claimed their own. There was a work-box, which that pretty Mrs. Wyldman had left behind, and which would have to be sent after her; there was Agatha's own work, not one stitch of which had she done the last three days; and the latest number of Dickens's new novel, which Mr. Nugent had read so amusingly. Agatha contemplated all this for a few moments, and then turning away, passed the door of the dining-room, where the servants were removing the sumptuous luncheon, and making preparations for a *tête-à-tête* dinner. She desired them to bring her a sweetmeat, and offered it to her dog, but Tiny had been fed to satiety, and was cross in consequence; he refused to beg, and when remonstrated with, snapped at his mistress. To escape vain regrets, it occurred to Agatha she would challenge her

husband to a game of billiards, and running lightly up stairs, she put her head into his study; but, alas for the change ten minutes had wrought in the newly-elected member for Stourbrook! Sir Vere Tempest sat before a letter and paper-strewed table, with his maiden speech fermenting in his brain, and a countenance so full of the good of the nation, that Agatha took her cue in a different sense from what she had intended, and slunk back appalled.

A little damped by this last disappointment, Lady Tempest sat down upon the stairs, and after meditating there for a short time, went finally to her own room, whence she soon reappeared in a bonnet and shawl, and country bye-road-proof walking shoes. It had occurred to her she would call upon a cousin, with whom she had lived much in childhood, and who had lately married the incumbent of Stourbrook, a town about two miles from Marfield. The road to the parsonage lay

chiefly through the park, and Agatha had walked there before without any companion but Tiny. So, anxious to make the most of the short October day, she set off briskly through the grave old chestnut avenue; the yellow leaves rustling beneath her light and fawn-like tread; her flounces, now filling like balloons in the brisk autumnal breeze, now gathered daintily round her as she carefully picked her way. She had not proceeded far, before a splendid retriever came bounding along to meet her. Tiny barked an asthmatic recognition, and his mistress, pausing to caress the dog, called: "Ernest! Ernest! where are you?"

"Here," said the dog's master, emerging from a bye-path, "I was wishing to meet you, to speak a few words with you, Agatha."

Lady Tempest looked blank at this intimation, like one who is prepared for a lecture; she put her arm within that of the

speaker, who was no other than her brother, and the curate of the parish, and began, in a deprecating evasive way, to invite him "that evening to dinner."

"You know," said he, gravely, but not unkindly, "you know this is an evening on which I seldom leave my study."

"I do know it, I confess," said his sister, "and I never could understand why."

"I think you mean, Agatha, you never can remember. It is not my fault if you do not know that Saturday is a vigil. But—to let that pass for the present—this week is the last in October. You know the exhortation I shall read to-morrow, and the service I shall perform on the Sunday following."

"I have thought about that," said Lady Tempest, and her face became very subdued; "I know how foolish and worldly I am, as well as you can tell me; and I think I get worse too, rather than better; I wish I knew what to do."

"If that is spoken sincerely, I will answer it at once, and enter again upon the subject you have so often evaded and shrunk from,—you know very well what I mean,—the glorious privilege of confession. I exhort you, very seriously, Agatha, as one of the most easily misguided of all God's erring creatures, to lay aside your pride and reserve towards the minister of the Church you are baptized in."

"Reserve!" cried Agatha, drawing away her hand, and parting back her long damp curls; "Oh, Ernest, when ever in my whole life did I seek to hide a fault from you?"

"You mean that you are naturally open and frank, as a sister should be to a brother. I speak of the relation that subsists between us, as a churchwoman and parish priest."

"You may be my parish priest, Ernest; but you know you are my brother still."

"And as such I speak to you with affec-

tion; but as your priest, I address you with authority. You acknowledge you are sinful and weak; a worldly and erring creature. Now where, as such, do you hope to find mercy and grace? Where, but in the blessed Church of Christ? And how do you find access to this Church? Through the sacraments administered by her priests. And who is to judge if you are a worthy recipient, but your own appointed priest?"

"That all sounds very right," said Lady Tempest; "but please don't be angry at my asking, how comes it to apply to me more than to Vere?"

Her brother reflected a few moments. "This is a matter," said he at length, "you can hardly understand at present: a little more faith and submission, Agatha, towards him who has the cure of your soul. I am here to answer you, 'What shall I do?' and not, 'Why and wherefore need I do it?' But to reply in some measure to your ques-

tion. I believe the time to be near at hand, when the eyes of many shall be opened; and not only you, and, if God grant, your husband, but many a wandering sheep shall be brought to acknowledge the inestimable value of much that is now neglected. Consider your individual case: here you are—a child in disposition and experience, a child almost in years—raised suddenly to a summit of wealth and position, where many a wiser woman than you has not known how to steer her course. Who, setting aside my natural claim, as your guardian and elder brother, is the person you ought to apply to, in cases of temptation and doubt?”

“Why,” said Agatha, looking him full in the face, “whenever I am puzzled about anything, I always go at once to Vere.”

“In a worldly point of view you could not have a safer guide, nor perhaps, as a churchwoman, one more inexperienced. Do not be offended, dear Agatha; no layman

can be a competent judge in matters which concern your salvation. It is not allowed you to run to and fro, and choose out your own guide to heaven ; your soul is committed to the charge of an ordained priest, who will have to give account for it hereafter. That priest is your rector, Archdeacon Fleming, who has given up the trust to me. I cannot express how it hurts and annoys me to find you so unwilling to acknowledge my influence."

" Ernest," said Lady Tempest, " how can you say that to me? You know how much I have always given up to you ; and since you have been curate of Marfield, I have scarcely given away a sixpence or a yard of flannel but through you. But as to calling you my parish priest—if you were the Bishop, Ernest, or the Pope himself, I should always look upon you as my brother. And then about confessing my sins to you ; it is just what I have done my whole life long ; as

many as I could remember. Why should you wish me to do it with my hands crossed before me in your study, and you with your surplice on, looking so grave, that it almost makes me cry?"

"Because it is the form prescribed by our Holy Mother Church, in the sacred rite of Confession. But I am not here to argue the point, nor to ask it as a favour to myself. Will you trust to your own private judgment, as to being a worthy communicant? And, trusting to that, will you come to the altar, and be willing to abide the results?"

"But it is not myself I trust to; it is,—you know what it is I trust to, Ernest, and not to my own being worthy."

"You trust to the blood and the merits of Christ, which you hope to obtain through the sacraments of His holy Church, to which you have access through ——"

"Through you and Archdeacon Fleming," said Lady Tempest, who never could hold

out long together in an argument with her brother. "You ought to know all about it, and I'm sure I know little enough, and you know I never like to refuse you; but never ask a question, or bid me do a thing which I may not repeat to Vere. You'll promise me that, won't you, Ernest?"

"What makes you so suspicious, Agatha?" said her brother, looking much displeased. "Do you imagine I would lead you to do wrong?"

"You know such a thought never entered my head. I only just mean about saying this, and not saying that of the dissenters. The fact is, let me promise as much as I will, I always let it out in the end. And now if you are going home, I must say good bye. I am going to call on Millicent Leslie."

A quick sort of spasm crossed her brother's face, for Ernest had once been the boyish lover of the gentle Millicent Brandon.

“ Good bye, then,” said he, with more fondness than before, as she put up her face for a kiss ; and he played for a moment with the glossy curls which the wind blew about in disorder.

CHAPTER II.

" Bien loin de la voie où marche le pêcheur,
Enfant, garde ta joie ; Lis ! garde ta blancheur."

VICTOR HUGO.

THE evening was closing in as Lady Tempest reached the parsonage ; the last day of the week had passed away, and given place to the twilight hour.

That twilight hour ! how little is it noted or sung of, and yet, which other of the twenty-four affects us more deeply, or more variously ?

The peasant's wife loves it, as, the long day's turmoil over, she rocks her youngest child upon her knee, and listens to the singing of the kettle. She could not tell

you what it is she feels in words—that rough and untaught woman ; but it is something that draws her closer to her own hearth-stone, and to those who cluster round it ; and she thinks more lovingly of bygone days, and parents buried, and friends passed away or scattered.

How differently feels the poor invalid, as the daylight fades from his sick-room, and he thinks of the long, long dreary night, with the ticking of the watch, and the flickering of the rushlight, and the hard steady breathing of the weary watcher ! God help you, poor sufferer ! Your day of life is ended ; that night comes on, in which no work may be done ! Repent of the past, and prepare for the future, for this is your twilight hour.

Again, look forth among the dwellings of the rich ! Watch that young girl in front of that blazing fire, with a book just closed upon her fingers. Look at her eyes, fixed

full on the glowing coals, as if her future destiny were traced there in hieroglyphics !

Look at that middle-aged gentleman sitting near her on the sofa, with his feet established on the fender !

How they both sit absorbed in their castle-building ! one dreaming of a change in the ministry, the other of a county ball.

Now cast one glance at that ragged boy, with fingers numbed with cold, who wanders about the town as the evening closes in. The bustle in the streets is gradually subsiding, the lights begin to shine in the windows, and the shutters are closed, one by one. The passengers hasten their steps, as the night grows chill and foggy, each with his appointed home in view, all ready to receive him. Friendless and footsore, the vagrant sits down upon a door-step, counts over his miserable alms, and bethinks him of the cellar he shall crawl to !

Poor desolate wanderer ! untaught and

uncared for! Who is there to tell you of a longer pilgrimage, of a better country? God be merciful to those who are homeless in the twilight hour!

Something of all this passed through Agatha's kaleidoscope mind as she opened the garden wicket. A troop of little school-girls came merrily up the path, singing shrilly odd scraps of psalm tunes they had learned with Mrs. Leslie. They suddenly stopped abashed at the sight of the beautiful stranger, and looked at her admiringly as a being from another sphere. Lady Tempest passed by them quickly, and crossing the lawn before the house, bent her steps towards a streak of light that shone from the lower window. Here, leaning her face against the panes, she contemplated the scene within.

The room was simply furnished, and as neat as hands could make it. No articles of *vertù* on the book-case, none of Agatha's little dandyisms on the writing-table; a vase

with some flowers formed the ornament of the mantel-piece; on the table stood the tea-tray, and a basket of plain work.

On a low stool on the hearth-rug sat Millicent Leslie, coaxing the smouldering embers to break into a flame. Her brown hair was braided over her marble forehead, and covered with a small white cap; her gingham, the neatest of all lilac patterns, sat close about her throat. The solemn strains she had taught the children seemed still to be lingering in her ears.

“ While worldly minds impatient grow,
More prosperous times to see,
Still let the glories of Thy face
Shine brightly, Lord, on me.”

So sang Millicent, in a low and plaintive voice, as the fire-light played upon her pale calm features.

Agatha tapped at the window, at the risk of frightening her cousin into a fit, and ran round to the outer door.

“ My dearest Milly, how thin you are

grown ; you are not ill, I hope ? No, thank you, no tea ; I have just finished luncheon. When are you coming to see me ? Why did you not come on Thursday ? Will you both come and dine with us to-night ? ”

“ Not on Saturday night,” pleaded Millicent, to whom the contemplation of her cousin, changed suddenly from a lovely romp into a fashionable woman, formed a constant source of quiet amazement.

“ I forgot that,” said Agatha, disappointed ; “ Ernest told me all about it, just now. Saturday night should be kept as a vigil.”

“ We do not keep it as a vigil ; we go to bed early always on Saturdays ; but Cameron comes in so tired after his long week’s work, he likes to spend a quiet evening.”

“ There is no accounting for taste,” observed Lady Tempest ; “ I think I’m a little glad that Vere is not a clergyman. But seriously, Milly, all this teaching school-children and this hard week’s work, does not

suit you. You have no idea how you are altered."

"Hush, dear," said Mrs. Leslie; "don't say that before Cameron. It would grieve him to think I was ill, and you know he wants me so often, it would never do for me to turn invalid."

"You seem a wonderfully useful wife. I wonder if I'm of any use to Vere. I'm afraid I never was, and never shall be, unless, when he makes speeches in the house, I sit up in the ventilator, and prompt him."

"Agatha! Agatha!" said Millicent, as with something of a mother's pride she gazed on her beautiful cousin; "you are as giddy and wild as ever."

"So I am," said Lady Tempest, becoming suddenly thoughtful; "you say so, and so does Ernest. And yet he would have me to bias and influence a clever man of sense like Vere Tempest."

"Bias him about the colour of your bou-

doir curtains, I suppose. Ernest has been jesting with you, my child."

"Ernest never jests now," replied his sister, gravely; "he never has done since you refused him, Milly; and my private opinion is, he never will again. I never dare tease him now as I used to before I married, or laugh when I get a talking to."

"Perhaps it is better you should not. Dear Agatha, you are so young and so ignorant of evil, and the world is so wide and so wicked."

"I should think Vere knows that as well as he does, and he will keep me out of harm's way there. But Ernest does not care so much for my keeping out of the wrong way myself, if I do but lead Vere into the right. He promised me, (Vere, I mean), a set of new cameos the other day, with a likeness of himself in a bracelet. So, very much pleased I was, and, like a goose, I went directly and told Ernest. Ernest said it was

a great waste of money, and I must ask for an organ for the church instead, and sing there on Saints'-days, and bring him with me. (He will go anywhere to hear me sing.) I thought it would seem rather strange and unkind, and refused at first to do so; and then came lecturing, and scolding, and preaching, till I cried and gave up as usual. Vere didn't seem very well pleased, but he gave me the cameos and the organ both, and so I got out of that. Then came the steward about the model cottages, with the potato-grounds and bee-hives and thorough draughts, and so forth. Two of them were promised to Sparkes and Flint, the keepers, and the third to the under-gardener, Richard. But you know Richard's daughters were never confirmed, and his wife goes to chapel sometimes. So the Archdeacon talked to Ernest, and Ernest talked to me, and I was to talk to Vere, about making his dependents high churchmen, and threatening to turn off dis-

senters. They assured me that Richard would not really be turned off, but only make his wife go to church; and they also told me something she had said of me, but that I did not like to repeat. Well! off went Vere, like a cork out of soda-water, and asked who had put that into my head? I didn't know what to say, I was so frightened, and I couldn't tell a lie to Vere; so then I had to cry my eyes out, to induce him to hush it up."

Millicent hesitated a few moments before she replied to her cousin; then, as if unwilling to treat the matter too gravely, "I would spare my poor eyes in future," said she; "you cannot afford to lose them yet. I would let all such matters alone, and keep all my 'teaching' for the school girls."

"Oh! the school girls," said Agatha, going off on a fresh flight: "did I ever tell you, Milly, what weary work I had? The Archdeacon examines them during evening

service, and one child declared the sexton had the keys when he ought to have said St. Peter. That made Vere laugh in church, and Ernest was so angry, he threatened to take away my class, and give me the little one of all. If I cannot teach the first class at school, I should think I was not fit to talk to Vere. But Ernest knows best, of course."

"Agatha," said her cousin; "you have one natural protector on earth; let neither priest nor layman stand between you and him."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," said Lady Tempest, looking up in her face; "and being a clergyman's wife, you must be orthodox in a second-hand sort of way. I am not all to Vere, I know, that you are to Mr. Leslie; but then you were engaged so long."

"We were; and we had known each other all our lives; he was just like a sort of elder brother. It appeared quite natural

when we became engaged, though God knows I had done nothing to deserve it. Then I seemed so worldly compared with him, a sort of fear came over me, lest I should ever prove a drag. So I studied his ways and opinions and habits, till I knew him through and through, and conformed myself as best I might. And now we are so happy."

"So you are. Now with us it was so different. I had never seen Vere in my life, three weeks before he offered. We had been dancing all night like mad, and I was just in the very middle of an apricot ice. What with waltzing and being proposed to, it so took my breath away, I never once thought of asking his opinions. And then came the settlements, and then came the trousseau, and—here comes Mr. Leslie."

CHAPTER III.

“ Those sunny days foretold by spring,
Those hopes so bright and gay,
Foster'd beneath its genial wing,
In autumn—where are they ? ”

IRON in frame and tall in stature, a stern and zealous man was Cameron Leslie. In season and out of season, never weary in well doing, he loved best to labour among those with whom his Master had dwelt. With the aged, the sick and needy, he was ever kind and gentle. With the rich of this world, Cameron was, less indulgent; their lighter and more frivolous pursuits he discarded altogether; he was not as one of them. He had but one treasure not yet laid up in heaven; and that was his gentle Millicent, with her thoughtful eyes, and twilight smile, and brow of perfect peace.

“ Milly,” cried he, as with weary tread he

entered his little parlour; then perceiving his guest, "Are you timid, Lady Tempest?" he added, "I have just been with a bad case of fever."

Agatha drew back and coloured. "Not very timid," said she, still keeping at a respectful distance.

Cameron sat down in his own peculiar chair, whilst his wife prepared the tea, and lit the candles.

"You know the person in question—your gardener, Richard Dalton. I believe he was to have one of Sir Vere's new houses, but at present he lives beyond the park, just within the parish of Stourbrook. I saw Dr. Barker just now, and he considers it a desperate case."

"I will tell Vere about it," said Agatha, demurely, "and send him some gruel, to-morrow."

She never rattled on in her random way when Cameron was by. Soon after, her pony-carriage came; she was swathed up in

mantles and furs, and rattled away briskly home, with Tiny fast asleep on her lap.

"She is a Sunday-school teacher now," said Millicent, after a pause.

"I am glad to hear it," replied Cameron, laconically.

"You must not judge her harshly.—Another slice of cake, dear?—It was really very kind of her to come."

"When she has no one at home to speak to."

"I wish you would like her better; indeed she has a good heart."

"The sorer judgment will be hers for perverting it: her prosperity has turned her brain."

Millicent found she was trespassing on tender ground, and finished her meal in silence.

We read in the Scriptures of a certain king of Judah, who went forth to Ramoth Gilead with a certain king of Israel, to do battle against the Syrian host. And the

king of Israel said unto the king of Judah, "I will disguise myself and will go to the battle, but put thou on thy robes."

Now, when the Syrian captains saw Jehoshaphat in his robes, they said one with another, "It is the king of Israel;" and they compassed him about to destroy him. But Jehoshaphat cried out, and the Lord helped him, and he returned to his house in peace. And a certain man drew a bow at a venture, and smote the king of Israel between the joints of his harness; and he stayed himself up in his chariot until even, and about the time of the sun going down, he died.

Something parallel to this may be observed in daily life; no arrow flies, but has its mission. If Providence wills to spare you, you may walk abroad in peace, nor fear the pestilence that walketh by night, nor the arrow that flieth at noon-day. But if your hour be come, submit and pray! for

the arrow will fly home, though it be drawn at a venture.

Soon after Agatha's visit to the parsonage, the fever broke out in Stourbrook,—virulent, infectious, and fatal. Early and late stood Cameron and his wife by the beds of the sick and dying. With nerves unshaken, Millicent smoothed down the pillow of delirium, and her active help and ready expedients brought ease and peace, long after hope had fled. As for Cameron, his life was one long prayer; one exhortation to faith, one message of mercy. From the parsonage, at all hours, went forth broth, and wine, and fruit; and messes and drinks that were never so relished as when made by Mrs. Leslie. And yet the pestilence passed over their dwelling, and day by day they returned to their home in peace.

Not so Lady Tempest. Warm and radiant with life, she shrunk with horror from a disease so fatal. Her well-matched ponies

no longer pranced through Stourbrook with their young and lovely mistress; nor the solemn old horses with the heavy chariot, and Tiny looking out of the window. Communication with the town was strictly forbidden the servants; the letters were fumigated, and Sir Vere cross-examined, whenever he returned from hunting. Her fears, redoubled by indulgence, deprived her life of peace; and Sir Vere was at length induced, by his spoilt and petted wife, to take up his abode in town, some time before Parliament re-assembled. Agatha drove herself to the station, to secure an uninfected *coupé*, and returned from her drive thirsty, with a headache and sore throat.

So her room was carefully darkened, as she lay upon a sofa, sipping iced lemonade, and lazily watching her foreign maid, as she packed up her splendid wardrobe.

There was her girlish ball-dress, looped up, may-day-queen-like, with flowers; there

her more matronly velvet, and sultana-like cashmere shawl. Then came her trinket case, filled with gorgeous jewels, gifts of a rich and doting lover, or of gratified friends delighted with Agatha's marriage.

She was roused from a half dream by whisperings and footsteps on the stairs; she sent out her maid to inquire if anything were wrong, and Mélanie went out, but did not return again. Then came a ring at the door-bell, and bustling to and fro; and Agatha rose from her couch, and drew aside the curtain. Winding slowly up the avenue, came what she imagined first to be a funeral procession. As, fascinated with horror, she tried to look again, she saw something on a shutter, covered up with cloaks and coats. The Stourbrook surgeon hurried on in front; behind was led a well-known favourite horse, with bleeding knees, and white with lather. Staggering and dizzy, Agatha left her room. At the door she met

Ernest, who tried to hold her back. Resistance restored her powers: with a strength to which his was as nothing, she tore herself away; broke one by one from her frightened, imploring servants, bounded down stairs in spite of the cries of "Keep back, Lady Tempest; hold her back!" and in the hall she met her husband. He was not dead! that was the first thing she saw; he knew her, and tried to smile. The surgeon desired she might be removed by force, but a voice that sounded like Cameron's said, "Poor thing! let her stay," and some strong arm held her firmly, and led her to his side. They made him up a bed in Agatha's little boudoir, and there for some days he lingered, shattered and paralyzed, with altered features, and that utter helplessness so awful in a man. His wife never left him, night or day; with a sort of jealous eagerness she kept her post—not even Ernest or Millicent might relieve her. When he woke

she sat by him and stroked his hands; when he slept, she lay down upon a mattress at his feet, like a dog. At length, one morning, as the grey dawn stole through the shutters, his spirit passed away. Agatha knew what it meant, though she had never looked on death. She stood quite still till some one closed his eyes, and then she gave a scream. It rung through every room of that large house! The servants needed no other telling of what had happened, and rushed with curdling veins, and hair on end, to their dead master and frantic mistress.

Agatha had caught the fever, in its deadliest and most virulent form. Day after day she lay raving in ungovernable delirium; week after week her life quivered only by a thread; and the Tempest vault, unclosed, gaped yet to receive her, long after her husband was buried. At times, by the hour together, she would repeat long-forgotten chapters, which she and Millicent, in child-

hood, had repeated verse by verse. Then came airs from some opera she had listened to with her husband abroad, or ballads she had sung to him in the days of their courtship. Now she would give orders for some brilliant *fête*, mention each of the company invited, and arrange the minutest details; then turning to those around her, she would ask with piercing accents, what it would profit her to gain the whole world, and lose her own soul?

But youth, and a constitution before untried, prevailed at last: and slowly and wearily she struggled back into life.

It was Christmas when Agatha first left her bed,—Christmas, when the whole of the neighbourhood used always to assemble at the Priory. But what a change was this! No sound of music, or cheerful voices within, no carriages without; nothing but the cawing of the rooks, as morning and evening they sullenly wound their way. Her beau-

tiful dresses were carefully put away, and her sombre mourning garments reflected in every one who approached her. Within was desolation, without was snow.

Millicent's first baby was born during Agatha's illness, and she herself forbidden to leave the house that winter. Cameron, by Ernest's care, was jealously kept away. So it happened that her only companion, her only protector, her only prop, was Ernest. To him, with a sort of desponding apathy, she resigned both her worldly and spiritual affairs; and by him, so soon as her broken health permitted, she was removed to a distant and foreign land.

CHAPTER IV.

*"Si scolorita, in su la siepe ombrosa,
Che appena si puo dir', questa fu rosa."*

PASTOR FIDO.

"Now then," said Archdeacon Fleming, as he gave up a large pile of letters to his servant, and drew his chair round to the fire; "now then, for business."

The gentleman thus addressed was standing at the window, whence, in spite of the summons to business, he remained gazing out into the street.

"Come here, Archdeacon," said he, "and tell me who is that?"

"That," said the Archdeacon, "is Lady Tempest."

A tall female figure, slight almost to

attenuation, was passing on foot along the pavement, down the opposite side of the street. She wore the serge dress, and close black bonnet, of one of those soi-disant protestant sisterhoods, established of late years in London. But nothing in her coarse, disguising costume could hide the drooping, broken, lily-like loveliness of her face and figure. The deeply sunk eye, cast down by rule, might only be guessed at by its long, silken lashes; but the exquisite chiselling of the wasted profile, the arch of the throat, the slender foot and ankle, attracted no less attention because the dress was sombre. Unattended and solitary, with weary, shrinking step, she passed along those streets, where so often, in the pride of her prosperity, she had been driven, the admired and courted.

A tall young lawyer returning from his chambers, a cigar in his mouth to keep out the evening fog, looked up in her face as he passed by. She started like a deer that had

been wounded, looked round, as if for some one who was not there, and went on her way trembling violently.

“In a few years more,” observed Arch-deacon Fleming, “when the church has got her own, and her members of both sexes are subject to confession, our sisterhoods will be better protected. Now then, for business.”

His companion remained gazing after Agatha, till the sweep of her long black dress was lost in the foggy distance. He then joined his friend on the hearthrug.

“I was not aware,” he said, “that Lady Tempest was already a sister.”

“No more she is, exactly; she wears their dress, and conforms to their habits in most things; the rest will come in time.”

“In *time*,” said Mr. Fitzherbert; “and what are we to do in the *mean* time, Arch-deacon? Here am I with the ‘Pastoral Aid,’ the ‘British and Foreign Bible,’ the ‘City Mission,’ and ‘Scripture Readers;’ all work-

ing in my parish like the blessed St. Francis Xavier himself. Then come Wesleyans, and Baptists, and many minor evils, who are all full in pocket, and bid high; I tell you, to do any good, my supplies must be liberal and immediate. Then as to the advowson of St. Chad's—"

"Why as to the advowson," said the Archdeacon, warming his hands; "there is a delicacy regarding that widow. If she furnishes the money, she will expect us to put in young Brandon."

"You appear," said Fitzherbert, disappointed, "to have done less in that quarter than I had hoped. Her husband has been dead five years, and she seemed subdued enough at the time."

"My dear Fitzherbert," said the Archdeacon, "divest yourself of that habit you have acquired, of suspecting the judgment of your superiors in the Church. I speak to you as a friend. And now listen to me.

“In my experience among women, which, both in society, in the confessional, and as connected with a sisterhood, has been, on the whole, extensive, I have made the following remarks.

“As regards position, women may be divided into three classes.

“First, the unmarried. Girls under a certain age are not generally useful as Sisters; unless, of course, something in their circumstances renders the connexion desirable. In our present imperfect state of conventual discipline, the gravest vow is liable to violation; and there is always the risk of their flying off some day in a tangent—the best of them are skittish. Send them out into society with a good strong bias, and as mothers, or wives, or Sisters of Mercy hereafter, there is always the chance of their doing you a good turn some time. After a certain age, unmarried women become invaluable; they take to the drudgery kindly,

and the work I have seen them go through is really surprising. They want keeping in hand, of course, or they are apt to grow troublesome. The fact is, in these days, what with the march of intellect, the freedom of the press, and liberty of conscience, English women want more keeping under than any race of females in Europe: hold the extinguisher down well over their private judgment, and never take it off till they are superannuated. To my second class belong married women, whose husbands are still alive.

“These may be subdivided into two degrees of usefulness; those who control their children only, and those who have influence with their husbands also. These last are the most important of all, and to do any good, should be brought to confession. There you must deal with them gently; they are creatures unused to the curb, and will not always answer to the rein, like a well-trained ‘Sister

of Mercy.' My third class, and now to the case in point, consists of the whole tribe of widows.

" Here we are interfered with in a thousand ways. The atrociously false system of education given to women in these days of new lights; the liberty and position accorded by society to widows; and the rights and protection they enjoy from the law, are enough to turn the head of the staunchest church-woman. It is seldom, indeed, you find that *rara avis*, a thoroughly broken-spirited widow; and then they are subject to a thousand influences, besides that of the Church,—their natural guardian. As Sisters of Mercy, they are open to many objections. A woman who has once controlled a household, will always have a will of her own from habit; in addition to that which, from all time, has been the principal feature in her original sin. As a refuge, a widow will soon tire of a convent;—the reactions those women are liable to is

beyond all calculation. They will spend days and nights in fasting and prayers for the dead ; and at length, after a good night's sleep, they will get up quite easy in their minds, and craving to go back to their friends. In those days, which I confidently hope for, when residence in a convent is made permanent, and the members of ecclesiastical establishments are secured from interference from the civil law, we may first hope to open their minds to the full consolations of the Church. Till then they will remain a refractory race, treated by all classes with over-indulgence.

“ Now, concerning Lady Tempest. In some respects, she is all we could wish for ; docile by nature, and utterly broken both in health and spirits, she has been for the last five years under the control of Ernest Brandon. She fasts and gives alms, in general, without disputing, and confesses, *to him*, as often as he requires ; but with all that, as a church-

woman, I consider her very imperfect. She yields to him as her brother, but not as her parish priest. Her mind is of that pliable and inferior order, which never can be opened to a real sense of her duties ; and were we to offend Ernest, or withdraw her from his influence, we should have all to begin over again, with a smaller chance of success."

" Poor thing ! " observed Fitzherbert ; it was the only remark he made, although the Archdeacon paused some minutes in evident expectation of something more.

" Now this docility," continued he at length, " which is the result of constitution, and enjoyed in common with the unbaptized, is a very different thing from that real self-abasement, acquired under the discipline of the church. I like to see a woman with a little natural ambition for the odour of sanctity ; it gives one a hold over her, and is perfectly consistent with the utmost subjection of the will and the reason, which is

the orthodox humility to strive for. But a woman like Lady Tempest, with a glorious confusion on all doctrinal points, and a general sort of notion that she is a sinner, and always will be ; who listens with equal submission to high church, low church, priest and layman ; and has an inherent conviction beyond the power of argument to eradicate, that her own good works will never do her much credit ;—a woman like this, I say, burdened with this false humility, is one of the most perverse, unavailable creatures that ever priest baptized. Now, my dear Fitzherbert, I hope you are alive to my difficulties.”

“ I am,” said Fitzherbert ; and slowly he raised himself from the mantlepice, against which he had been leaning. “ Concerning Lady Tempest, I appear to have been in error. I believed that she gave away willingly and freely, or I would not have applied for her money. My own income

is insufficient for the charities of the cure in which I labour, and I believed you the almoner of a zealous and munificent churchwoman. There I appear to have been mistaken, and there the matter ends.

“Respecting St. Chads; with submission, Archdeacon, I have found my opinions supported by higher authority than my own. I say this that you may not again find it necessary to reprove me.

“Ernest Brandon is an amiable, to a certain degree, a zealous man; but he partly shares the weakness you describe in his sister. In a rural district, where she has property, and you are always by to direct, he is a useful and an estimable churchman. In a parish like St. Chad’s, where the population is manufacturing, and educated in a Chartist sort of way; where the Scriptures are circulated, and misconstrued and perverted, the sects beyond counting, and the difficulties innumerable, he is not the man to act. He

has neither ability nor firmness—he would make our party contemptible. If he has not enough of the spirit of a missionary to give up his interests to the welfare of the Church, we are better without him than with him.”

“I think so myself sometimes. I assure you, my dear Fitzherbert, our opinions coincide on all points.

“I have always felt, from the time he was my curate, that sooner or later we should have to pass him on. As an Anglo-Catholic he has neither tact nor judgment; he never knows how to adapt himself to circumstances, nor how far, in these slippery times, he may firmly take his stand. He returned home from Italy last year in a very ultramontane state of mind. Rather than he should bungle I would send him over, and let him take all he can with him. Thus we should secure the perpetual advowson; and St. Chads, or

whatever his parish may be when he secedes, would be open to an abler churchman."

The young clergyman took up his hat. "I am not speaking from self-interest," said he; "I hope you do me justice there; it would pain me to be misunderstood."

"To be sure—of course—no one does you justice more fully; and—stop a minute," holding him by the button-hole: "I have some money of her's by me still; just a trifle for immediate use. Don't go in such a hurry; I do you justice, of course."

CHAPTER V.

“ Du Heilige ! rufe dein Kind zurück,
Ich habe genossen das irdische glück,
Ich habe gelebt und geliebet.”

SCHILLER'S *Wallenstein*.

AGATHA had watched all night by the bed of a sick woman ; her patient was not one of the lower orders,—the severer duties of the sisterhood were never imposed upon her. She had neither the resolution of a missionary, nor the nerve and self-reliance of a strong-minded woman. She was gentle and pliable, did always as she was bid, and cried when she was scolded. She held a sort of nondescript position which no one appeared anxious to define ; she spent most of the time in the convent, and though not actually amenable to its laws, was kept by

the Lady Superior in a sort of indulgent subjection. As yet, the Holy Mother was merciful: she was never required to confess except to Ernest, nor severely reproved but by him; and many an unconventional flight was passed over and forgiven, which in any other member of the sisterhood had called forth strong measures.

The present scene of Agatha's labours, was the small upper room of a house in Greek Street, looking out on Soho Square.

The woman she attended had passed the night quietly, and Agatha had slept also; and now, as the day dawned, she drew aside the curtain, and looked out, not on the sunrise, for the room had a northern aspect, but on the effect of the sunrise on the city.

There is but one sunrise in the longest day; one spring in the year, one early youth in life. Those bright young leaves, as yet but half unfolded, on those few ragged shrubs in the square; how fresh and lovely

they look, what a rest to the eye of the dullest citizen, what a glorious sign to those whose hopes are on another resurrection ! But yet a few days more, and those leaves will be altered, they will have become a deeper colour, a maturer green ; the first dense fog will stain, the first storm dash, the first intense sun scorch them ; and though many a dewy sunrise and mild twilight may refresh them, they never will look the same again—never.

And Agatha's spring was over, and she, like a poor severed leaf, was carried to and fro with many a wind of doctrine ; and many a strange creed she had never learned in childhood, now rose between her and her peace ; and she could only deplore her own unworthiness, and hope in her imperfect way that her Saviour would deal with her mercifully ; and that some day she might be gathered in to that safe garner, where those who sow in tears shall reap in joy.

“ Oh, for a heart to praise my God,
A heart from sin set free ;
A heart that 's sprinkled with the blood
So freely shed for me.”

Such was poor Agatha's sincere aspiration, and diligently she laboured in the path which her teachers assigned her, to acquire that clean heart, and that right spirit. She pulled down the old church at Marfield, and gave money and directions for a gorgeous place of worship in the correct mediæval style. The villagers murmured at the fall of the poor old walls, where they and their fathers had worshipped ; but the Archdeacon explained it was not those fathers they must think of, to whom they had done reverence in the flesh ; but the old mediæval fathers, who had wrestled on Sundays and burnt witches ; whom nobody living remembered, and of whom in individual cases it was singularly apocryphal if they had ever even worshipped at all. She worked altar cloth upon

altar cloth, in exquisite and costly embroidery; painted the Athanasian Creed in illuminated letters for the parlour of the Mother Superior; and herself provided, and, when permitted, arranged, the choicest flowers to deck out the altar of the chapel. Regularly every Sunday, and daily when in the convent, she partook of the holy sacrament; liberally she gave alms as Ernest directed; and ever ready was she with her mite of consolation for the destitute, the sorrowful, and sick.

And while fully engaged in these active labours, she enjoyed, to a certain degree, peace; but in hours of meditation, of vigil, or prayer, where was the self-reliance of that poor bruised reed?

Her devotions were wearisome and lifeless, being strictly confined to those forms of prayer allowed her by her spiritual directors; forms beautiful and comprehensive in public worship; for the daily devotions of our

chamber, monotonous and insufficient. Unaccustomed in youth to the proper control of her thoughts, they wandered perpetually during the constant repetition; hers was not the "spirit of adoption;" no argument or assurance of Ernest could ever convince her of that.

With a mixture of wonder and reverence, she contemplated the other sisters; as, rigid, uncomplaining and submissive, they went forth on their daily, monotonous round of duty and privation; or, fearless and active, carried on their labours in scenes which the firmest might shrink from. For such as they, there might be hope of heaven; but *she* with her shattered nerves, and shrinking dislike of hardship; with her spiritless prayers, and thoughts going back to earlier, brighter days; with her clinging, craving love for social life, and freedom, and alternate fitful bursts of grief and birdlike gaiety; how was such a one as she to hope for the

favour of her ministers, those stewards of God's mysteries, and his mercy?

So reasoned Agatha with herself, on the morning of which we speak; and thus she communed with her own sad heart, till roused by a summons from her patient. Relieved by this interruption to her musings, she began in her fairy-like way to flit about the room, and make a variety of arrangements, conducive to the comfort of the invalid.

Who has not been present at that toilette of a sick-room, which takes place after a long night of illness and of watching? The putting out the lamp, and the letting in daylight; the sweeping away the thick coat of ashes from the grate, and trimming up the sickly fire; the putting out of sight the half-empty tumbler, and the lotion, and the stale barley-water! Then the sick woman herself! The settling the bed-clothes, and turning the pillows, and parting the hair, entangled with wet bandages and tossing.

All this did Agatha perform (of which it may be as well to state, that the cleaning of the grate came last); and then she washed her hands, and prepared the breakfast. Such exquisite arrowroot! smoothly mixed, and so delicately flavoured! Then with the lightest of all fairy-like springs, she perched upon the bed by the side of the sick woman, and fed her spoonful by spoonful; maintaining occasionally her balance, by the application of her pendant feet to the bar of the chair which formed the breakfast table.

"Well now," said old Mrs. Leigh, "what a thing it is to be sure, for a poor sick woman like me to be waited on by a lady!"

"You must not call me a lady," said Agatha; "I am only a poor Sister of Mercy, in the service of our holy Church."

"Don't tell me," said Mrs. Leigh, "that I don't know a lady when I see her; I was partly a lady myself once, but that's past and gone. Perhaps"—and she parted back

Agatha's hair in a motherly sort of way—
“perhaps, poor thing, you've no parents.”

“I'm a widow, and an orphan,” said Agatha, quietly, “and I've no near relations but a brother, and a cousin who is married.”

“Dear, dear! well, more's the pity, God's will be done. Perhaps it's for want of a home, you've taken up this sort of life?”

“I have a home of my own, in — shire, though I hav'nt been there for some years; you know, to go about doing good, as Ernest (that is, my brother) wishes, a lady must belong to a sisterhood for protection.”

“Well, it isn't for me to say anything, when you are so kind as to come here, and nurse me; but I wish those poor ladies who do so much good, could go to their own homes sometimes. Surely they might belong to the convent, and wear those black dresses, without flounces or trimmings, and yet be a comfort to their parents now and

then. If a lady gets married, it's another thing, of course ; but otherwise, I don't find in my Bible that they've any right to leave them in that way, as soon as they're reared."

"Hush ! hush !" said Agatha, looking frightened, "you should never read your Bible. Pray don't let me find one in your room, or I must tell the holy Mother. You know only clergymen read the Bible ; and even those parts which we hear in the churches must always be explained by them. They have all been ordained by the Bishop, and received the proper authority ; and when they explain the Scriptures, we should listen, as if it were our Saviour."

"Jesus Christ provided for his own mother," said Mrs. Leigh, keeping doggedly to her point ; "before he knew that all things were accomplished ; and that's my belief he intended us all to do, in one way or another, according as we are circumstanced. Now, my poor girls are obliged to go out to

maintain themselves; and very good they are in sending me a few sovereigns now and then, when they can spare them; but, bless you! what's that to having them with me, to keep me from being lonesome, and cheer me when I'm in trouble? But, as I said before, it's not for me to argue, when you are here, so good as to nurse me."

"And do they never come home?" asked Agatha, who, having satisfied her conscience by the small reproof she had administered, began to feel her sympathies excited on behalf of the four Misses Leigh.

"Never for long together, except they're out of situation; and then there is such wearying, and advertising, and registering; and when they get another, they're so pleased and so thankful, one would think they had got a home. There's such work and such worry with the 'solid English education,' and 'speaking French fluently,' and the 'music, Italian, and rudiments of

German,' and the so many years' 'experience in tuition.' That's Louisa, and Matilda, and Helen; poor Susan has to come down to 'strict religious principles,' and 'a consistent temper, combining kind treatment with firmness.' Well, God's will be done! Oh dear!"

"But I thought the Archdeacon was so kind in recommending them."

"So he does. God reward him for all his kindness! But then, they must go where he chooses. He sees all the answers to the advertisements, and gives them good advice, or a word to recommend them, or a 5*l.* note, just as it happens. And then, when they are settled, they write to him all about their pupils, and the ladies they live with, and so on. It was he that got Helen her situation with Miss Lucy Irvin, whose mamma is just dead, and her papa in India; and they want her to grow up to be a Sister of Mercy. Fifty-five pounds a year, and a

new suit of mourning! If that wasn't a piece of good fortune! Poor Helen, she tried to be a daily governess, that she might live at home with me. But, bless you! she couldn't get enough to buy shoe-leather, because she had never learned to sing. So she paid a master to give her lessons, and sorely she strove to learn, and weary work it was to hear the awful noise she made; but she couldn't make anything of it. So she got this situation with the Irvins; and now they are living in Mount-street with Miss Lucy's grandpapa, and she brings her to see me now and then."

Agatha laid down the morsel she was eating. "Do you know Annie Leslie?" said she.

"Yes, I do. She makes tea for her papa every morning, and then she takes some breakfast up-stairs for Mrs. Leslie, and nurses the baby whilst she dresses."

Agatha sat for some minutes in silence. She had heard something of Millicent's illness, but it never had been brought before her like this.

"Don't you like your breakfast, Lady Tempest?" asked Lucy.

"I am not hungry, my dear, thank you."

The child took up her pelisse, and fishing about among a substratum of petticoats, arrived at length at a pocket, whence she drew out a box of French *bon-bons*; from these she selected a highly coloured butterfly, and dropped it into Agatha's tea, which was sugarless. Poor Agatha kissed the child, and made an effort to swallow the tea, whilst

the choking in her throat rose almost to suffocation. "Are you a relation to Annie's mamma?" continued Lucy, cracking a bon-bon.

"Yes, my dear, we are cousins."

"Then why don't you go and nurse her now she is ill?"

"Why don't you go and nurse her?" continued she, presently, after waiting in vain for an answer.

"If I go to Annie's mamma, will you come and stay with Mrs. Leigh?"

The child looked taken back for a moment, then quickly recovering herself, inquired, "Is Mrs. Leigh a relation of yours?"

"No, but she has no one to wait upon her."

"Who waits on Mrs. Leslie?"

"Why, Annie and her servants;" and Agatha coloured as she spoke.

Lucy meditated a moment in silence, then returning to the attack; "Can't you pay

some woman to wait on Mrs. Leigh, and nurse Annie's mamma yourself? Do you know," continued she, lowering her voice, "Grandpapa says she may die some day, as my mamma did at Calcutta, and then how sorry you would feel you had not nursed her!"

"Lucy! Lucy!" cried Helen Leigh, whose quick ear suddenly caught up what was passing; then glancing at Agatha, she went on in a mollified tone; "What would your kind friend the Archdeacon say, if he heard a little girl giving her opinions in that way? It was only last week that I told him how good you were grown, and how you gave your sixpence to a poor little starving child. So charitable," continued Helen, in an audible whisper to her mother; "to think what she will be when she is confirmed!"

"I shall never be as good as Annie Leslie," said the child;

"You shouldn't speak so loud, Miss Leigh, if you don't mean me to hear what you say."

“ Well, well, my love, it is time for us to be going ; we shall be late for morning service ;” and Helen led off her pupil, in evident perplexity whether to propitiate Agatha as a baronet’s widow, or Anglo-Catholic.

Agathaspent that morning with Mrs. Leigh. She mused on the child’s conversation, and resolved to speak to Ernest about visiting Millicent. Then came thoughts of that friend of her childhood, with her patient and steady love ; her half-mother-like indulgent care for her wayward orphan cousin. How meekly and faithfully she had done her duty in the state of life where God had been pleased to place her ; and though not “ taken out of the world,” how her Saviour had “ kept her from the evil.” And that little stranger cousin, whose infancy had passed without a caress from her ! who, in her childish love, had taken the place where Agatha ought to be ! What was she doing here, making duties for herself, and professing peculiar sanctity,

whilst the first and most crying of all debts of love was left to a child like that? And then came dreams of a speedy reunion; which, as gradually they assumed the colours of reality, made her heart bound with hope and joy.

Early in the afternoon came a Sister from "the Home," on her way to some visits to the poor, and Agatha received orders to go with her; and once more released from the influence of the sick-room, and out in the warm spring sunshine, her spirits rebounded like an unstrung bow, and she gave way to one of her most ill-timed attacks of perverse and incorrigible light-heartedness.

First of all, in a solitary street, they met some children spinning a top, which the Sister Elizabeth knocked down with a sweep of her dress as she passed by. Agatha stopped to pick it up, and whereas it had rolled into the gutter, she took out all the half-pence in her pocket, and offered them to purchase a

new one. The Sister Elizabeth perceived what passed, but knowing that Agatha was a privileged person, thought fit to take no notice.

Then came a little sweep, who had been struck by a tipsy cabman, the tears running down his sooty face as if he had been tattooed. Upon which Lady Tempest offered him sixpence, desiring him not to cry, nor yet to spend his money in gingerbread, but to take it home to his mother. And the sweep said, "Thank you, my lady," and grinned at her so pleasantly with his fine white teeth, that she went on her way laughing merrily.

"Sister Agatha," said the Sister Elizabeth, "are you to repeat all this to our Mother, or shall I?"

And Agatha was steady in a moment, and swept on demurely, in her swan-like way, by the side of her graver comrade. She the more quickly lost her inclination to mirth,

as she perceived that Elizabeth looked pale and worn, and her eyes were slightly swollen; and on they went, gravely and silently, their eyes cast down on the pavement. A tall young clergyman, who happened to be going their way, had for some time kept them in his eye, but this they were not aware of. And patiently Elizabeth threaded her way through streets, and lanes, and alleys, till Agatha, who never as yet had been sent among the extreme poor, grew puzzled and thoroughly frightened; she drew her dress tightly round her, and grasped her companion's wrist.

They turned at length into a small close court, and stopped at the door of a poor-looking dwelling; some sallow, unhealthy children were playing round the threshold; one of whom, at Elizabeth's request, went immediately to summon her mother.

"Some lodgers in this house," said she to her companion, "have been attacked with a sort of low typhus; you will go up stairs and

unpack this basket, and I will come when I have spoken to the landlady."

Agatha took the basket, and a child was sent to guide her. She plodded her way up some steep, narrow stairs; dark, broken in many places, offensive to sight and smell, and arrived at length at a room under the roof; the atmosphere of which, when the door was opened, deprived her for a moment of all power to move or breathe. Making a strong effort as her faintness passed away, she went on into the small dark garret, and bending her head under the slanting tiles, she saw on a mattress, in a corner of the room, two beings—a man and a woman. What the bed-clothes consisted of, could not very well be ascertained; they were covered all over with some ragged-looking clothes, belonging to both parties, and tossed here and there in disorder. A jug of cold water was placed on a chest near the bed; the room held neither table nor chair.

"I am a Sister of Mercy," said Agatha, shyly advancing; "and the Sister Elizabeth, who has been here before, has sent you some fruit and some wine."

The man, whose black and unshorn beard made his sallow features look yet more grim and ghastly, began a long detailed account of his own peculiar troubles. The woman lay silently by his side, and took no notice of Agatha. She appeared to be by many years the younger of the two; her face had fallen in to the very extreme of emaciation; her eyes had a wandering and glassy look; the drops stood thickly on her forehead, and her long matted hair was damp with perspiration. Agatha took an orange from her basket, and quickly preparing it, offered her a mouthful.

"You will find it refresh you," said she; "I once had the fever myself."

The sick woman looked up in her face, and a puzzled expression came across her.

"Your's is almost like a face that I used

to know once; do you come from the country?" asked she.

"I used to live there once, long ago; my home is in London now."

The girl closed her eyes disappointed.

"You don't happen to know if the violets are out yet?" she said, in a dreamy kind of voice.

The man gave a sort of low laugh—"It's her way," said he, apologetically, to Agatha; "she's fresh from the country as it were, she left it but two years ago."

"If it were only one sight of the clear blue sky," said the girl, "one mouthful of fresh air, one drink of cold spring water!"

"What is your name?" asked Agatha, putting her face down close to hers.

"Hester Dawson, now I'm married:—take care, you'll catch the fever."

"Ah!" said Agatha, as a tear gathered slowly in her eye; "I shall never fear infection again."

CHAPTER VII.

"Cast thy bread upon the waters, and thou shalt find it after many days."—ECCLESIASTES.

"DAWSON," said Elizabeth, reproachfully and sternly, as she entered the open door; "Williams, the Scripture Reader, has been here again to-day."

Dawson began eagerly to deny all connivance at the visit, and begged that strong measures might be taken for his future protection; but Hester feebly interposed. "Hush! James," she said, "don't stand in the way of a dying woman's peace. You've got the turn of the fever, and you long for their wine and their sago, and all the good things that they bring us; but I'm all but face to face with my Judge; and I want the Rock of Ages and the water of life, that

they seem to grudge us so sorely. Don't keep him away from me, Ma'am, if you please," said she, turning her face to Elizabeth, "or you'll have more to answer for some day than perhaps you'll like. I say it in kindness, for I'm going fast, and you've been very good to James and me."

"Wretched woman," said Elizabeth, taking up her wooden cross, and holding it to Hester's white lips; "poor wandering misguided soul, I charge you, in the name of the priest who sent me, to kiss this holy cross; be reconciled to the church of which it is a symbol, and do not listen to those who would entangle you in the snares of unlawful curiosity. What have I concealed from you that it is fitting you should know? Have I not constantly read in your presence those portions of Scripture which form part of the services of our Church?"

"Is that all you know of the Bible?" asked Hester. "Then perhaps you have

never heard of some verses which our Clergyman's wife taught me once, at Sunday School? 'And the Spirit and the Bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely. For I testify unto every one that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. He that testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly; Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.'"

Hester ceased speaking, and a yet greyer tint spread over her pallid features; her eyes wandered as if seeking some one, but

in vain; the sense was gone for all purpose of earthly vision.

"Oh, Hester!" said the man, looking pitifully at her; "you're not going to leave me yet! Oh! not yet! not yet!" cried he, wringing his hands; "and I all alone in this garret!"

Hester tried to put out to him one of her wasted hands, but it dropped in the effort; her breathing became troubled, and a rattling was heard in her throat. For upwards of an hour, those two Sisters of Mercy stood over the dying woman; the one directing with promptness and energy, the other obeying, trembling and tearful; as Hester drew near her end, her husband became much excited, and at times it required their united efforts to keep him down quiet in bed. At length, after several minutes exclusively occupied with him, Elizabeth, on turning round, perceived that Hester was dead.

"Agatha," said she to her companion,

who, with quivering and ashy lips, was muttering a form of prayer; "take that handkerchief and tie up her face, whilst I manage this frantic man."

Agatha took up the handkerchief, and was preparing to perform the office, when the jaw of the corpse dropped.

Physical strength, resolution, nerve, all snapped in a moment! Stifling a cry, with a last effort Agatha rushed out of the room, dashed, without care or precaution, down the steep and craggy stairs, missed her footing when just at the last landing, and rolled down a dozen steps. For a minute she lay there stunned; then she became sensible that some one was lifting her—thought it was the corpse up stairs, and opened her mouth to scream; but just then some water was dashed over her, and the fresh breeze, such as it was in that close and wretched court, blew full on her face and revived her. She opened her eyes upon a grave and benevolent

countenance, looking down at her sadly and earnestly; felt herself in the grasp of a pair of arms that could carry such an one as she was quite easily; and, thus restored to a sense of security, relieved herself by a passionate fit of tears.

“Poor thing!” said the mother of the sallow little children, “she’s not used yet to this sort of thing belike. I’ve never seen her here before. Oh dear! that one can’t take a lady to the door to give her a little airing, without having all the neighbours—Take her into that room, please, Mr. Fitzherbert; and you, you little villains,” bestowing a cuff on the nearest child, “keep out of my way for the present, or you’ll hear of it again, I’m thinking.” •

Fitzherbert took Agatha into the room assigned, and placed her in a sort of arm-chair. “You have not the nerve for duties like these,” observed he. Agatha hid her face in her hands in acknowledgment of the

fact; and her tears, like "the last drops of a thunder shower," changed gradually into the quiet, scalding tears of repentance and self-reproach.

Fitzherbert walked to the window and wiped the perspiration off his brow. Then came the Sister Elizabeth, with a face of disappointment and displeasure; she proceeded in silence, and not unkindly, to bathe Agatha's temples with water, and apply the usual remedies, till she recovered her strength and self-possession.

"I'm very sorry," said she, wiping her swollen eyes, "I'm so foolish, I always was; it reminded me so of that other death-bed."

Elizabeth sighed deeply, and turning in a lady-like manner to Fitzherbert, showed a disposition to bow him off the field.

He maintained his ground stiffly but politely. "I was witness to the fall," said he, "and in this case you will allow me to act. I have ordered a fly to be in attend-

ance, and I will be accountable to the Mother Superior."

Elizabeth bowed a grave and unwilling submission, and drinking off some of the water which Agatha had left, returned to her solitary watch by the bed of infection and death.

Fitzherbert accompanied her to the foot of the stairs, promised to return that evening to visit Dawson, and then offered his arm to Agatha, who, crimson with annoyance, her veil drawn tightly down, passed quickly through the gaping crowd to the fly which waited near.

"I believe," said Fitzherbert, as he took his seat by her side, "that I speak to Lady Tempest." For the second time that day Agatha acknowledged the unaccustomed name. "I have never met you before," continued he; "it is more than probable I may never have that happiness again. Will you pardon a stranger for asking very

seriously, if you have finally decided to become a Sister of Mercy?"

Agatha looked full upon him with her clear violet eyes, that, in all her many changes of joy and grief, had never once lost their childish expression of truthful, implicit confidence. "You think I am not good enough," said she, "and you are right; I know it. But Ernest wishes it so. What shall I do?"

Fitzherbert wished at that moment that she had died when he held her in his arms, as he had done a few moments ago, and as he never should again, rather than that she should live to ask him that question, so calmly and unconsciously; but he answered gravely and quietly:—"We are not all constituted alike, we are not all called upon to labour in the same sphere. You may be a faithful and zealous servant of the Church, without withdrawing altogether from domestic life. Take care you do not,

from affection to your brother, mistake your vocation. I advise, I would almost request you, not to bind yourself irrevocably, till you have had one more interview with your other friends."

"You are a clergyman, and advise me that?" cried Agatha, looking up, like a bird the door of whose cage has suddenly been opened at sunrise.

"Of course," continued Fitzherbert, "you will feel no delicacy in repeating this, either at your nightly interview with your Superior, or in the confessional." Having said this, he relapsed into a rigid silence.

"Thank you," said Agatha, timidly and gratefully, as the fly stopped at "the Home," "thank you for all your great kindness, and pray ask the Sister Elizabeth to forgive me for my selfish weakness in leaving her all alone, so tired and pale as she looks."

"It is not exactly fatigue, I believe," observed Fitzherbert, drily; "she has a

brother who is dying of decline;" and touching his hat, he took leave.

"My God," said he, within himself, "if I have erred against the interests of Thy holy Church, let Thy wrath fall on me alone, Accept as a penance a life of redoubled toil, of redoubled self-denial, of hourly mortification. Let the vision of happiness where-with I have been tempted fade out of my mind, like as a dream when one awaketh, that no one may say I have acted from selfish motives. And oh! above all things, be thanked, that she has no part in this struggle."

CHAPTER VIII.

"Take back thy bird to its nest,
Flowers with the twilight are closing."—SONG.

THE Sisters were silently filing into the chapel as Agatha entered "the Home;" and she, too, joined them, and took her accustomed place. As the service began, she became aware that, instead of the clergyman who usually officiated, Archdeacon Fleming was reading prayers. Agatha had never liked him, and her involuntary prejudice formed a constant source of confession, rebukes, and tears, between herself and Ernest. We are told, that dogs and children instinctively know those who love them really, and those who caress them from interested motives, and Agatha was half a child. During service her thoughts wandered

more than ever; now it was Lucy Irvin's simple warning—"She may die, perhaps, some day, and then how sorry you will feel you did not nurse her;" and then came a vision of that horrible face in the garret. Now, with a vigorous effort, she listened to the Archdeacon's voice as he read the Second Lesson—"... Not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock." And then came Fitzherbert's look, which struck her less at the time, than it did on after reflection; "I would advise, I would almost request you, not to bind yourself irrevocably till you have had one more interview with your friends." And when with her no longer powerful, but still sweet voice, she joined in the second Canticle: "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace;" and prayed in the Collect for "that peace which the world cannot give;" she felt an instinctive faith, that could she

but visit that guardian of her childhood, and the feared, but much revered Cameron, perhaps even yet they might guide her to that peace, which was now so far away.

After service the Mother Superior came up, and inquired what had become of Elizabeth; with downcast eyes Agatha told her simple tale. The reverend Mother coloured, but uttered no rebuke; she desired some simple stimulant might immediately be administered to her daughter, who shortly after received a summons to attend her in the parlour.

There, round a table strewed with parchments, sat the Mother Superior, the Archdeacon, and Ernest. Agatha felt that a crisis was at hand; she was physically exhausted, it is true, but the very excitement of her overwrought nerves gave her a kind of desperate courage which the others never dreamed of. She bowed to the Archdeacon with a sort of proud respect, placed her

hand within her brother's arm, and conjured up vividly in her mind the image of Millicent Leslie.

"My daughter," said the reverend Mother, after slightly clearing her throat; "I wish, in the presence of these holy men, to express to you my satisfaction at your conduct during the winter. You have perfectly justified the opinion I entertained of your vocation; and I here invite you, in the name of the Master whom I serve, to devote yourself, body, soul, and estate, to the cause of his holy Church." The reverend Mother looked up, Ernest Brandon looked down, the Archdeacon looked straight into the fire.

"Reverend Mother," said Agatha, "I thank you for your good opinion; but before I make any decision, I wish to return to my friends."

A slight electric shock seemed to pass through two of the party; the brows of the Superior contracted.

"My daughter," said she, "I cannot grant your request. You have put yourself under the guidance of the ministers of Christ's Church, and their words you must obey, as you hope for salvation. Rich in my love, and their approbation, you are now above the influences of the world."

"It is not the world I wish for," said Agatha; "its pleasures are nothing now to me. It is not even God's fresh air, and the blessed free life of the country, that would tempt me to disobey you. I have a cousin who is very ill, and I must see her before she dies."

"My child," said the Superior, "drop the subject; I command it in the name of those to whom Christ has given the oversight of His flock. Perhaps at some future time, when you have gained our confidence by a course of implicit submission, as my daughter in Christ, I may yet indulge your request. To grant it now would hurt

the interests of your immortal soul ; which, above all other things, is the object of our present anxiety."

"But you told me," urged Agatha mildly, "if I would try this life for a little while, I should then be free to act as I pleased."

"And so you are, legally free ; the holy Church forces her salvation on no one. Withdraw the hand you have voluntarily put forth to the plough ; draw back from the holy sacramental life you have adopted ; go forth in disobedience to the priest who confesses you, and to me who rule here in Christ's place ; and answer for yourself hereafter, at the judgment-seat of God. My child ! my child ! stray not, like a wandering, defenceless sheep, from the only true fold, where you are safe and guarded. Every wish of your heart shall be indulged, that is not inconsistent with salvation."

"I do not wish to leave you in disobedience," said Agatha, sighing deeply ; "I will

promise to return, if you wish it—you and Ernest; but I must see Millicent, she is ill.”

“Who told you that?” asked the Superior, abruptly.

“I was told it by a little child called Lucy Irvin.”

The Archdeacon bit his lips.

“Agatha,” said Ernest, “cease to argue. Return to the chapel this night; and there, in the presence of the Mother Superior, make the sign of the cross kneeling, in token of perfect subjection. Obey her implicitly in all things, as you hope for my affection, and do not tempt me to forsake you in displeasure.”

Agatha coloured crimson to her temples, and drew herself up with the gentle dignity of a weak and offended woman; she took hold of her brother’s hands,—in vain he attempted to withdraw them; she looked up in his face, sad, astonished, reproachful; and forced him to return her glance.

"Ernest!" said she, "Ernest! we are orphans, you and I, and there are but we two, and I am a childless widow. How dare you talk in that way of forsaking me? How could you answer for it before the bar of Jesus Christ? And there you will have to stand one day, though you are a priest. I do not want to disobey your wishes; God knows how I have always given in without a question. To please you I came here, and to please you I will return, though it be with a heavy heart. But I must see Millicent—I must. She nursed me in sickness, and I love her; and you loved her, Ernest, once; and I would rather bear your anger than desert her."

Ernest tried to shake her off, but it would not do; she clung to him as only a woman can. The Archdeacon, seeing matters look grave, now tried for a rescue in the shape of a compromise.

"My dear Lady Tempest," said he,

soothingly, "you mistake us, indeed you do. Ernest does not speak of forsaking you as a brother; he speaks as the vicar of Christ, as descended in a spiritual sense from the twelve Apostles, to whom were given powers to bind and loose."

"Ay!" said Agatha, turning sharply round, "and one of them was covetous, and betrayed his Master."

"To us clergy are transmitted in some degree those powers; it is our business to read and expound the Scriptures; to administer the sacraments, and many other rites, which, though not, strictly speaking, sacramental, are still appointed means of grace. With these solemn powers entrusted to us, you must be aware, that to trifle with the authority of a clergyman is a very presumptuous thing. But I am sure that your brother does not wish to thwart you; and if on some other little points you are ready to meet his wishes,

he will give up to you this visit to Marfield."

"You need not be afraid to trust me there," said Agatha, still looking at her brother; "Cameron Leslie is a clergyman."

"He is an unsafe guide, as I have often told you; and if you go there, it will be against my wishes."

"Then," argued Agatha quickly, "clergymen do mistake sometimes."

"My dear Lady Tempest," said Archdeacon Fleming, mildly, "since the days of the great schism of the Middle Ages, there have always been a set of clergy who have been wanting in due reverence for the ritual of the Church, and the tradition of her holy Fathers. You must keep these distinct in your mind from the true, faithful priesthood, who live in holy observance of her rites, and are fitting dispensers of her spiritual gifts."

"Ernest," said his sister, "I have heard you read in church of a poor woman who

anointed the feet of our Saviour with ointment, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and He suffered her to do it, though His disciples rebuked her. I used often to think of that, and wish I could sit at His feet as Mary did, and receive His blessing face to face, instead of through the priests of His Church. But it seems to me different now. If clergymen are really the dispensers of His mercy, why you are a clergyman, and I am your orphan sister. You will never leave me to perish—never! You may be angry for a while, but you will always relent; you will not let me die in my sins. I will say when my heart is troubled, ‘My brother is a priest!’ and lie down to rest in peace.”

The Archdeacon here looked at Ernest; and the Mother Superior coming forward, said hastily a few words in Latin. It was a language which Agatha had never learned, she did not understand a syllable; yet a sudden suspicion flashed through her as the

reverend Mother spoke. She shivered for a moment slightly, and said in an unsteady voice, "I wish to speak alone with my brother."

The Archdeacon and Superior spoke aside with Ernest, and almost immediately left the room. As the door closed behind them, and she heard their retreating steps along the passage which led to the refectory, Lady Tempest sat down at the table.

"What papers do you wish me to sign?" asked she.

"These," replied her brother; cowed slightly, in spite of himself, and opening them before her.

"What do they relate to?" she continued.

"The transfer of your property in the ———, to myself and Archdeacon Fleming, for the purpose of purchasing the advowson of St. Chads; which living, on the death of the present Incumbent, shall be

given to whomsoever shall be appointed as fitting by the Archdeacon and his co-trustees."

"That is the property our Mother left me, Ernest."

"And having no heirs to whom to bequeath it, you restore it to Him who gives all things, for the interest of His holy church, and the benefit of your soul, my Sister."

"If souls may be bought," said Agatha, "you did well to leave it to me, Mother!"

One by one Ernest showed her the necessary documents, and wherever he placed his finger, she slowly and distinctly wrote—
"Agatha Tempest, widow."

When the whole transaction was finished, she leaned her head back in her chair. "Now," said she, "I have signed away all I brought to Vere, and whatever remains, I owe to him who never deceived me, Brother." The momentary change in Ernest's countenance did not escape her.

"If you have intercepted any letters from Millicent," said she, "may God forgive you as I do, and as she would if she could believe it of you; but oh! how we trusted you, Ernest; and you loved us both once."

Her brother's brow grew scarlet. "My God be my witness," he said, "I have done what I believed to be my duty, and a weary duty has it been! I have striven to keep you from the evil, and now I am weary of striving. You know it is not Millicent I fear, but the influence of Cameron Leslie."

Lady Tempest pointed to the papers.

"Look," said she, "how docile and obedient I have been. I have never refused you what you asked; I never will, if you ask me for all that I have left. Sign it away I cannot, but I will pay it away as it is due, without a murmur; I will only keep back what I need for my daily bread, and that I will work for if you choose it. Only let me go to Millicent. I will even go

home—to what used to be my home, at Marfield;” and here her lip quivered and she wept; “and you shall come with me to keep me from what you call the evil, and then I can walk backwards and forwards whilst Millicent is alive, and when she is gone, I will come back here, or go where you choose to place me; for then I shall have no one left but you—and you are altered.”

Ernest sighed deeply. “This comes of private judgment. Oh for a faith where you need only obey and you are safe! But you have done a good work, Agatha, poor desolate child that you are; I will not debar you from the praise you merit. I will speak to Archdeacon Fleming, and if I have any influence you shall go to Marfield. Oh! Agatha,” he continued, as his sister hid her face on his shoulder, “if it costs you a pang to go to Marfield, it has cost me many a one to live there as I once did, and she so near,

and yet such a gulf between us. But faith and obedience! faith, and obedience to those who stand above us in the Church—and then, what signifies a little heart's blood more or less?

“ ‘When the shore is gained at last,
Who will count the billows past?

“ Let that be our comfort, my Sister; our beacon light amid the waves of this troublesome world. Let us turn a deaf ear to those voices that would whisper to us counsel that differs from those of our priests; let us smother those inward impulses that would lead us to do this or that without reference to their will; let us crush them, sear them, though it be with a red hot iron that leaves a scar for life. And then we shall be safe; think of that! safe here below, within the pale where none are lost; and hereafter, that golden halo which they talk of round the brow of the saints.”

CHAPTER IX.

"What though the tempests rage,
Heaven is my home;
Short is my pilgrimage,
Heaven is my home.
May I but safely stand
There at my Saviour's hand,
Heaven is my father-land,
Heaven is my home."

MRS. SHAW, the quiet and lady-like widow of the late Incumbent of Stourbrook, had dismissed her little school. The children whose parents lived near set off for their respective homes, whilst a few little girls, whose friends were in India, were sent out to play in the garden.

"Annie," said one of them to a fair-haired child who was busily collecting her books, "come with us and play at hide-and-seek; do, please, Mrs. Shaw says you may. You

are such a nice little tiny thing, we can hide you under a cabbage-leaf, and you lie there as still as a mouse."

"No, thank you," said Anna Leslie, "not now, I shall be wanted at home."

"You, you midge!" said Mary Hunter, a tall girl, lately come; "and who in the world wants you?"

"Papa wants me to make his coffee," said the child, quite simply; "and he never has it later than five."

Her playmates made no answer; even with their slight knowledge of Mr. Leslie, they did not feel inclined to press the subject. They were all very fond of Anna, though they could not understand her altogether. She was so small, and so infantile in appearance, and not the least clever in school, and yet she was always being "wanted at home," and trudged back to her work there when lessons were over, as naturally as the others to their tea and

bread-and-butter. Mrs. Shaw, too, had a private respect for the child, and called her into the parlour as she was leaving the house, and cut her a slice off her tea-cake, which Anna put aside with her spelling-book and hymn-book, intending to share it with her father.

So off she set, across the two large meadows which separated Mrs. Shaw's from Mr. Leslie's; singing, in her high pitched, childish voice, some lines which Millicent sang to her sometimes, as she sat by her little white crib.

“ Oh, we shall happy be,
When, from sin and sorrow free,
Lord, we shall dwell with Thee,
Blest, blest for aye.”

As she drew near the stile which separated the two fields, she saw a lady sitting on it, dressed in black. Her face was turned away towards the parsonage, and she did not observe the child, as shyly stopping

short in her song, she drew near with noiseless steps. Poor Anna stood still, greatly puzzled; infinitely too bashful to address a stranger, she looked vainly around for a gap in the hedge, where even a fairy could creep through. So, after waiting some minutes in hopes that the lady would turn, and clearing her throat in vain to attract attention, she timidly went on:—

“Come to the happy land; come, come away;
Why will ye lingering stand? why thus delay?”

If the stranger had been stung by a hornet, she could hardly have started more violently.

“My dear little girl,” said she, “my dear little girl,” and bursting into tears, she stooped to kiss her. Anna coloured up, and opened wide her eyes in childish wonder. “Look,” said the lady, as she took from her shawl a beautiful greenhouse bouquet; “should you like to take these flowers to Mamma?”

"Oh yes!" said the child, greatly mollified, and stretching out her hand for the prize; "Mamma likes flowers so much."

"I am going to see her; will you come with me? You shall take the flowers, and I will carry your books."

Anna looked up in her new friend's face, and seeing something there which won her confidence, took hold of her other hand.

"Do you know my Mamma?" she asked.

"I knew her when I was a little tiny girl, no taller than you are, Annie. Can you tell me how she is to-day?"

"She is worse to-day," the child answered, promptly; "but she says she shall be better to-morrow. And baby is not so well, he is cutting teeth. Have you ever seen our baby?"

"Not yet; do you think I may nurse him?"

"I dare say," answered Anna, in a

hesitating voice, as if fearful of promising too much,—“I dare say you might give him his sago to-night; but you must mind not let the fire scorch his face, and pat him on the back when he chokes.”

Thus conversing, the friends approached the parsonage. How the shrubs along the carriage-road had grown since Agatha stood there last! late that October evening before the fever broke out in Stourbrook. Perceiving her father on the lawn, her little companion ran on, whilst Agatha, unseen, turned aside, and crept silently to Millicent's room.

And there sat Millicent with her baby on her lap, rocking herself slowly to and fro. “How little, how very little altered!” thought Agatha at first, till she saw how she had fallen in a little about the temples, and her eyes were more large and more hollow, and there was such a bright, bright spot on one cheek—it might be the heat

of the fire. And there was the baby, not long for this weary world, looking gravely at the flame with his anxious, old man's face, like a little fairy changeling.

Neither Cameron nor Millicent knew Agatha at first, so completely was she changed. The former was even more startled and shocked than his wife, though he did not think fit to admit it. He had always blamed Agatha severely for her neglect of her duties at Marfield; and his utmost exertion of charity stopped short at her absence from Millicent. Nothing but that pale, wan face, those deprecating eyes, that shrinking, as if from a stab, when anything was said which might imply reproach, could ever have mollified Cameron.

Marfield formed part of Lady Tempest's magnificent jointure, and it was only after her death that it was settled on a nephew of her husband's, the present Baronet, who had a seat in a distant county. Sir Vere had

been sincerely attached to his tenantry, and both earnest and liberal in his endeavours to benefit the lower classes in general. Though but slightly acquainted with Cameron, he had always looked up to him as a man of enlightened views, and called him into counsel more than once, in matters which concerned his dependants. So Cameron was the more indignant when his widow withdrew herself from Marfield, and not only left his work unfinished, but gave it over without question into the hands of men of diametrically opposing principles. He could not forget, if she did, how during Sir Vere Tempest's life a sum had been annually set apart for repairing and improving the dwellings of his tenantry, and building new cottages with every modern improvement. And ever since his death that money had been otherwise devoted; and had gone to a new painted window in the chancel, carved oak work for the pews,

and a painting for the altar, which Ernest had picked up abroad; a gem, by an old Italian master.

Sir Vere had contributed largely to a school between Marfield and Stourbrook, which was open to children of all classes, who received an education as extensive as the time of their attendance would permit. If any child gave promise of particular talent, he was certain (so long as his conduct was good) of receiving both assistance and encouragement to improve his abilities, and rise by his own merit. But long had that subscription been withdrawn, and turned over to the school of the Arch-deacon, where the curb-rein was drawn tightly over the march of intellect, and confined it within orthodox bounds. The children learned a great deal of chanting for the services which they daily attended, had a holiday on saints' days, and a tea-drinking on every great festival of the

Church, when the elder ones were said to confess; but that was so entirely optional, it could not be set down as a rule.

Changes there had been, too, among the tenantry, and several old labourers who had served both Sir Vere and his father, came, dismissed and dejected, to seek labour and lodging in Stourbrook.

Did Agatha know all this?

If she did, said Cameron, a timely repentance was the best he could bring himself to wish her. If she did not—what good works had she gone and done, that she could venture to offer her Master, as atonement for all she had neglected?

And as for her conduct to Millicent! her faithful, gentle, enduring, indulgent Millicent!

At first he used to break out at intervals, but finding that Millicent only fretted the worse, he gave up the matter and subsided into silence—a rigid, implacable silence.

As we have said, her altered appearance surprised him at first into compassion, and, like Millicent, he uttered neither question, remark, nor reproach; but a closer acquaintance served to draw out his latent charity, and gradually he began to understand more fully the good and weak points of a character so yielding and timid.

Day by day, and week by week, she came steadily over from Marfield, through heat, wind, or storm, with her bouquet, or basket of fruit. She would come in the morning twilight, if Millicent was ill and would want her, and return all alone after dusk; she who used to trip about her park like one of her own shy deer.

She was very subdued—poor Agatha! They thought much more of that than of the burst of grief at first. She would flit about Millicent's couch in something of her old, elf-like way, like an odd sort of variation of the Agatha they used to know.

And sometimes, when playing with the children, the spirit of mirth would break out unawares from under those heavy lids, and play about that arch mouth and chin, there was a mixture of light-heartedness and heart-break, that spoke more to Cameron's feelings than even her usual quiet sadness.

She startled him a good deal one evening, as he was speaking of a desperate case of illness in one of the extreme poor; she turned round and asked, "if he thought she could be useful at nights, if Ernest would give her leave?"

He was a good deal amused, too, in his own grave way, at those thin, white fingers, that used to be so dainty; how they dived without shrinking into poultices, and leach-pots, or whatever might be the matter in hand. On one of these occasions Cameron laughed. Agatha had so seldom known him do so, that she looked up a little

surprised, and inquired what had happened to amuse him. He sighed, and said: "Nothing, God knows;" but from that time forth, his manner told Agatha that by-gones were forgiven. For if in the party she belonged to, in common with many other sects, there are some who would wilfully misguide; he saw there were many of the misguided, as devoted and self-denying in their error as any of God's fallen creatures. So each in their way, each with their trials, each with their duties assigned them; that little band of pilgrims, sick and healthy, old and young, journeyed on to the home of the weary faithful.

CHAPTER X.

"But let my due feet never fail,
To walk the studious cloister's pale,
With storied windows richly dight,
Casting a dim religious light."—IL PENNEROSO.

ONE evening late in May, after walking home from Stourbrook, Lady Tempest sought her brother, intending to ask him to go with her to some cottages. But Ernest was at the organ, playing chants; and knowing that whilst so employed he did not like to be disturbed, she lingered out on the terrace, hovering up and down among her flowers, which she seemed to understand, and to coax into thriving, like a sort of relation of theirs. And forth on the balmy air, with their cathedral influence, came pealing those solemn strains, the very

embodiment, in their mysterious grandeur and heavy sameness, of the spirit of mediæval worship. And then came some masses they had heard in a chapel at Pisa; and then came that song of the swan, the Requiem of Mozart. Lady Tempest knew that when her brother played long together, it was generally to calm his mind for some unusual effort. So, soon after the last chord died away, she was almost prepared for the message she received—"Mr. Brandon wished to speak with her directly."

Ernest was standing on the balcony and watching the evening sun as it sank behind the opposite hill. He was looking grave and anxious, and the summer breeze, as it lifted his clustering hair, showed a pale and emaciated brow.

"Dear Ernest," said his sister, "you fast too much—you are looking so unwell!"

He put his hand kindly on her shoulder. "Do you remember the sunsets at Sorento,

Agatha, the summer before last? How oddly ideas are associated. We were standing together in the orange grove, and watching the sunset in the bay, when Pietro came home from the post, and gave me the Archdeacon's first letter about St. Chads. He said, if we could help him with the funds for the purchase of the perpetual advowson, that the first presentation should be mine. I heard by this morning's post of the death of the old incumbent."

"And when are you going to live there?—and may I go with you? You'll let me live with you when Millicent don't want me—won't you?

"Listen to me, and don't fly off to conclusions in your old wild way. From that day to this, I have had floating in my mind two visions, of two different ways in which I may be called to serve my Maker. The one to which inclination would lead me is not open to me here, in the land of the

Anglo-Catholic; whose Church, though holy and beautiful still, and gradually veering round to its primitive perfection, is still abused by many of the heresies and errors that have defiled it three hundred years. But it is open to me elsewhere—in those southern lands where God is worthily worshipped. In that Church whose priests have never betrayed her, whose authority has never been bated, whose mysteries have never been profaned by the gaping gaze of the curious, cavilling laity;—in that Church, where the senses as well as the mere cold intellect are absorbed in the act of adoration; where the glorious communion of saints is not confined to this world, nor the souls of the dead shut out from our prayers so soon as their bodies are buried;—within that sanctuary there is prepared for those who seek it a life secluded from all earthly responsibility and care, where the conduct is reduced to one simple act of faith and

perfect obedience. There, years roll on in one continued succession of holy service; fast, and festival; and the odour of incense, and the sound of the organ, and the light of the taper is present to the senses whether sleeping or waking, in life or death. They talk of more special revelations in a state like that, of a more glorious reward hereafter. Oh, Agatha! I have thought of these things till the lamp has burnt out, and the sun has risen, and yet I have not slept. Oh! for such a life—such freedom from worldly care! such a foretaste of perfect peace—perhaps, of glory!”

His sister sighed deeply.

“Do you think, dear, such peace as that is meant for us here below? I mean—don’t be angry, Ernest—but when God sends us trials, and temptations, and duties, and that sort of thing, do you think we are right to turn from them as if we knew the best?”

Her brother turned sharply round.

"How long is it since you have taken upon you to pass judgment on the institutes of the Church?"

"I did not mean anything about the Church, you know quite well," said Agatha, crying quietly; "but I did not know such places were meant for all alike; and I was thinking too, what would become of me when Millicent is gone, and you shut up in a convent?"

"God knows," muttered Ernest, between his teeth; "it is you who have chiefly stood between me and that vocation. But to let that pass for the present. The Archdeacon is not unwilling to consider it a good measure ultimately; but at present, he prefers my labouring in the second path I spoke of, in the cause of the Catholic Church."

"You mean as the rector of St. Chads. But won't that be a great deal better? You can do so much good among the schools and poor people, and I can be with you some-

times. I will be very obedient and work all day, and then I can go home and make everything comfortable when you come back tired at night."

The shadow of a pang crossed Ernest's brow, for he knew where she had learned to think in that way; but he checked the rising rebuke, and suffered her speech to pass unheeded.

"And that, too, is a noble path of duty," continued he, "though weary and thankless, and perplexing; everlastingly thrown back on your own erring judgment, and yet made responsible for so many misguided souls. But there is some merit in giving up one's own inclinations, and preparing at least a few stray sheep for the worthy reception of that dominion which shall surely be established in this kingdom ere long."

"May it be so, if you wish it," said his sister; "but it does seem so strange

you should belong to one community, and yet receive the stipend of another."

"Agatha! Agatha! and you know that I give it to the poor."

"I know you do. I wish such wicked thoughts would not rise to perplex me; but it seems so like professing what is not true; and I have heard the Archdeacon himself read in church who the Father of lies is, Ernest."

"So much for the blessed system of reading the Bible to the laity! Have you ever heard anything, Agatha, of the end sanctifying the means?"

"I have heard you talk about it with the Archdeacon."

"It is so in this case. The means in themselves are harmless—the end, salvation. Dismiss the subject from your mind, and repeat a penitential psalm whenever you find yourself dwelling on it unawares. If in spite of this you find it still perplex you,

became her instinctive repugnance to such subjection.

Well knowing she was liable to be questioned, she had carefully avoided, under Cameron's roof, all religious discussions and inquiries about the management of the parish. The secrets of that hearth would be sacred, she knew, with Ernest. But with Archdeacon Fleming! the man whom she feared and disliked!

"Oh that he were here to direct me!" thought she, as she caught sight of the shadow of the church, and remembered who lay buried within;—"he who was never impatient when I came to him in my childish troubles. If I could but know what he would say! I wish he could have spoken more as he lay there dying on that bed, and told me what to do when he was gone. But I asked if he left any directions, and Ernest told me No."

She sadly rose from her seat, and closing

the window went up to the glass on the toilette. As she drew out the comb from her hair, it fell down in long rich masses. She remembered how proud he used to be of her hair, and how often he used to play with her ringlets as she sat on a stool at his feet. The remembrance brought a tear to her eye. Then it suddenly flashed across her like a shot, how they had sat thus together the very Sunday evening before he died ; and he had read out of the great folio Bible, and made notes with his pencil on the margin. Then again—how, soon after their marriage, he had shown her a secret drawer, which he told her no one knew of but herself ; and she had stood carelessly by, and tickled him with the tips of her curls.

The Bible was in her boudoir ; the secret drawer in the little private study. With an impulse beyond resistance, Lady Tempest took her lamp and left the room.

CHAPTER XI.

“ The promise of the morrow
Is glorious on that eve,
Dear as the holy sorrow,
When good men cease to live.”—KEBLE.

AGATHA paused at the boudoir door; it was the room her husband died in, and she thought she had never been there since. But now, with her hand on the lock, a horrible remembrance flashed across her; how once in a night of delirium she had crept down there, intending to seek her husband; how she had found there a coffin and lights, and the startled watchers had screamed for help, and she had been forced away struggling. She entered the room with a sort of awe, as if death abode there still. There was the furniture, so familiar to her once;

there stood the timepiece that had ticked through those dreadful nights. It had not been wound up for years, and the hands stood at half-past ten. It was just six o'clock, she remembered, as she looked there last, a little before he died. The book she sought was laid on its accustomed shelf, in the black velvet cover she had made with her own hands. How many years had passed since Agatha had held a Bible! The thought of the confession that hung over her, and her natural timidity and habitual implicit submission, had almost turned her back, even then.

"I will not read the Bible," said she to herself; "I will only read the notes on the margin."

The book was a very old one; it had belonged to her husband's father, whose birth, marriage, and death, were registered there; with those of a sister and brother.

Then came "Vere Charles, son of the

above Chas. Tempest, Bart., and Jane his wife, born Febr'y. 2d, 18—;” beneath, in a different hand: “Married, April 20th, 18—, Agatha, daughter of the late WM. BRANDON, ESQ.” The date of his death was wanting.

With swimming eyes his widow turned over the leaves, in search of the well-known writing; she came to it first in the Epistle to the Ephesians. The margin of the last chapter was closely written in pencil: “These first nine verses are addressed to the servants and masters, children and parents of Ephesus. Quære! does the application to them cease here, or may they take to themselves the following passage, including the 17th verse?” What the 17th verse contained, Agatha dared not read then, but she did read it shortly after. The first verse of the following epistle was also marked; “to the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the Bishops and Deacons.” Beneath was a note as follows:—

“The saints are mentioned here, exclusive of the Bishops and Deacons. From this I collect, that those epistles where the saints are specified, are partly intended for the laity; also that by the author of the Apocalypse, addressed to a woman and her children. I also believe, if the Scriptures were written for lay members of the Christian church, their successors, the laity of the present age, have an equal right to read them with the clergy; and an equal trust committed to them, to preserve those same scriptures unperturbed and uncurtailed. This is my faith, and this I will maintain. V. C. Tempest,” Against the last ten verses of the 2d chapter of Colossians he had written: “Stand fast then in the liberty wherewith Christ has made you free.” There were no more notes, except one in the 1st of Thessalonians, 4th chapter, 13th, and 14th verses: “But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep,

that ye sorrow, not even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him."

He had written on the margin; "I know that my Redeemer liveth."

Agatha sat before the Bible for hours, and turned its leaves over and over; but she found nothing further, except references she dare not refer to, with the dates of different sermons, and by whom preached. One or two were by Cameron Leslie. The sense of his presence was too immediate in that room to allow her to think calmly just then; the abstract doctrine was scarcely thought of, in comparison of the desire she felt, to know what he would have wished concerning herself. And that she had yet to learn. So she took up her lamp once more, and closed the Bible, and went to the room of the secret drawer, which had been his private study.

That room was less familiar; they had

never been much together there. It was so thoroughly a gentleman's room, with its leather arm-chair, and huge buhl inkstand, and books in sober bindings. She had sometimes been sent for to the study to read or talk over letters, and sometimes she had gone for sociability, and sat with her work in the window. But it had usually ended in her falling asleep, or being sent away "for making such a fidget." It was some time before she could find the exact drawer she wanted, with the private drawer within, and then she had forgotten the secret of the spring, and her trembling hands tried vainly many a pressure before they discovered the right one. She found it, however, at last, and the drawer sprang open with all its contents untouched and undisturbed since he had closed it last—how long ago she knew not. There was a small packet ticketed, "The hair of my precious Agatha;" and she remembered the long glossy ringlet she had

given him before their marriage. There was a miniature of herself, in her early beauty, and one of the late Lady Tempest; he had shown it to her once, and had told her about his mother, how good and how pious she was. There was one small packet of her letters to her son; another of all that Agatha had written; and a third, much larger, of letters and documents, chiefly in his own handwriting. These Agatha opened, one by one: there were sheets upon sheets of Memoranda headed; "Expenses of Election." "Names of tenants who voted against me. N. B. Not to raise rents this Lady-day, the poor devils will think I bear malice." "Answer to G—'s speech on the — tax. Make notes for next session." "To secure the annuities to my Mother's old servants in case of anything happening. I believe those old women will live for ever." "Receipts from Cameron Leslie, about paying a few bad debts off for Smythe's widow.

Told him not to make a fuss. I believe that is an honest man." "Sketch of a tour through Switzerland if I and my wife live till summer." Then, "Copy of my letter to Archdeacon.

..... "I enclose a cheque on Drummond to the amount you name, for repairing Marfield Church. Brooke tells me for that sum the thing can be thoroughly done. I cannot say I enter into your views about building a new church in its place. As a matter of principle, I hold the Almighty to be best honoured by good works done to his creatures; and so much is still wanted for the poor both of Marfield and Fernleigh, that I am not prepared to give so large a sum, to what is thus reduced to a simple matter of taste and feeling.

"As a matter of taste I have not a word to say; as a matter of feeling, I confess to a weakness for the poor old church, in spite

of its architectural vandalism; it has many associations for me, and so it be kept decent and commodious, I would rather worship there than in a newer, or if you prefer it, a more mediæval building.

“Yours truly,

“V. C. TEMPEST.”

Next came some letters from an early friend, with others on business, which had but little interest for Agatha; she had almost refolded them all, when she suddenly caught sight on the back of one, of some writing in his own hand. It was the copy of a letter to Ernest, dated about a fortnight before his death.

“*To my Brother, Ernest Brandon.*”

(“The duplicate of this is in my desk.”)

“DEAR ERNEST,—Poor Agatha’s panic about the Stourbrook fever has not exactly infected me, but it has put into my head a

train of thought which I cannot altogether shake off.

“In case of my own death—and we are all mortal—I have a wish or two to state, which can be best fulfilled by you. I cannot think of Agatha as my widow, the idea is so utterly preposterous; I have always imagined her life would be short and joyous; but supposing I am called hence first, I solemnly charge you, Ernest, be her guardian in my stead.

“I should wish her to live at Marfield; I should like my bird to stay in the nest I have made so trim, (of course I only speak of the time she remains my widow; God forbid I should fetter her with my memory.) Teach her to carry on all I have begun; to rebuild year by year, on a better principle, those wretched hovels where so many of my tenants herd. It has long been on my mind to remove this disgrace to an English landlord, and primary cause of the

low tone of morals among the poor. If I live, I hope to accomplish this work myself; if I die, I leave it a solemn bequest to Agatha.

“I wish my present tenants to remain undisturbed, except in case of flagrant misconduct; I know them all personally, more or less, and desire to make no exception. I wish old or disabled labourers to have the usual weekly allowance I have always been accustomed to give, except, of course, in cases of intemperance, or accidents resulting from the same.

“The jointure secured to Agatha will abundantly supply all this, and I shall feel, if I am summoned first, I leave a good angel behind me to take my place in Marfield.

“And as for the child herself, I can only say, according as you cherish and protect her here, so may God protect you whenever you need it most.

" Poor Agatha! I know no reason, humanly speaking, why she and I should not live to a ripe old age, and do our day's work together, or leave it to our grown up children to finish when we are gone. If that blessing be allowed us, this will never meet your eye. If it do, it will seem to you the more sacred, as I shall then be gone where the good we have done or caused will be all that can follow us hence. Till then, I remain,

" Your faithful friend and brother,

" V. C. TEMPEST.

" Oct. 20th, 18—,

MARFIELD PRIORY."

CHAPTER XII.

"River, river, rapid river, swifter now you slip away ;
Swift and silent as an arrow, through a channel dark
and narrow ;
Like life's closing day."—MRS. SOUTHEY.

It was a summer's evening ; the sun shone brightly in the west, the flowers filled the air with their scents, and villagers trimly dressed flocked quietly to Church, for it was Sunday. The bells in the old grey tower chimed sweetly and joyously ; they had tolled for a funeral only the day before, and as the mourners walked on a little apart from the rest, it fell on their ears like mockery.

By the open window of a garret in a small alley sat a sickly young woman, and listened to those evening bells ; she thought of the days when a Sunday-school girl she had gone to that old grey Church, and

looked all the while at the dazzling sunbeams as they danced through the open panes, and longed for the weary service over, to go forth free amid the flowers and birds and sunshine. And then, how little by little a change was wrought, and a light shone on her, which was not from the world without. How things which she heard at Church connected themselves oddly with things she had learnt at school; how prayers here and there, which had seemed but forms of words, opened to her all at once their full and vital meaning, and scraps of sermons remained on her mind, and were pondered there in silence. Hannah had an elder sister in those days, who stood by her at church and school; a girl with a taller form and a brighter eye than her own, who rejoiced in a memory more tenacious of chapters, a readier wit when catechised, and a clearer, truer voice, as they joined in the hymns and chants. A pretty village

girl was Hester Dalton, with her gipsy face and dimpled smile, and winning, respectful *prévenance* to her betters. Her immeasurable superiority cast a shade over her quiet sister; but their teacher laboured patiently with both alike, and withheld not her hand from scattering good seed abroad, not knowing which should prosper, this or that. And in one case the seed fell on good ground; in the other, it was sown among thorns.

"Hannah," said a peevish voice from a bed in the corner of the room; "has that drink come from Mrs. Leslie?"

"No, Mother, not yet."

"Not yet—so you always tell me. How long does she mean to make me wait, I wonder? How would she like to be kept waiting herself? I should like to ask her that."

"Oh, Mother! and her baby was only buried last night."

“If it were only last night, I’m sure it seems like a week, and I’ve been thinking of this drink all the time. You must make me some tea, then, child. What’s the weather?—this room’s like an oven.”

“The night’s growing sultry, Mother; the trees by the Church were rustling just now as if there would be a storm.”

Hannah blew up the fire, which, in spite of the heat, they were forced to keep alive for a constant supply of hot water, and prepared her mother’s tea. As she knelt upon the hearth with the toasting-fork, and held up her apron as a screen, you saw that though otherwise coarse in appearance her hands were soft and delicate.

“Who’s that on the stairs?” cried Mrs. Dalton; “that’s not Sarah Miller’s step. Make haste to the door, child—quick—maybe its from Mrs. Leslie.”

As Hannah opened the door, a lady in mourning entered.

"I don't know your name," said she, in a timid, apologetic sort of way; "I've brought you some barley-water from the Vicarage. Miss Anna was coming with it, but she was afraid of being late for Church."

"There now," said the invalid, as she drew her breath, after a deep draught of barley-water; "you'll give my kind duty to Mrs. Leslie, if you please, Miss, and the drink's a thought too acid. I've been very poorly all the night, too, you may say, and I think it's that pudding was too heavy."

"Mother!" pleaded Hannah, in a reproachful tone, but her mother would not be silenced.

"If it wasn't the pudding then, it was something else she sent me. I know I've ate nothing this week but what I've had from them. And how's Mrs. Leslie, please, Miss?"

"She is very poorly to-day. She has had so much trouble lately."

"Well! well! we've all our troubles," said Mrs. Dalton, in a captious tone, as if a little jealous of Millicent having more than her share. "The trials of the rich are not like the trials of the poor."

"All trials come from God," said the stranger, in a gentle tone.

"They all do in a way, of course, there's no denying that; but the troubles that come from the Almighty direct, are easier to bear than those that come second-hand. Will you sit on that chair, if you please, Miss, and I'll tell you a few of mine."

The visitor sat down at the foot of the bed, to humour the poor old woman; oppressed with the heat, she untied her bonnet, and pushed it a little off her face; as she did this, Hannah suddenly drew back, and continued to watch her intently.

"Perhaps, Miss," Mrs. Dalton began, "you've heard speak of Marfield Priory, that's just beyond the town. That's my

Early Tompkins's place, the widow of our poor old master. A very good master he was, and a very kind gentleman, too, and Richard, my husband, was his gardener many years. We lived on the common then, that belongs to Stourbridge parish, this side of Marston Park. The common is the Tompkins property, so we lived in our master's house, though not in Marston parish. Hannah, what's that noise?"

"It's just the thunder in the distance, Mother. There's a drop or two of heavy rain."

"Take the fire out, then, I can't breathe for heat, and you can have the tea I've left. Well, Miss, as I was saying, Sir Vere was very kind; and he built up a row of moral cottages, and Richard and I were to have one that he might live near his work. But just then Richard caught the typhus fever, and Hannah took it from him, and awful bad they were; Mr. Leslie saw them every

day, and Mrs. Leslie, too. Well, one afternoon Sir Vere pulled up to ask how Richard was. I couldn't go to the door myself, I was all in such a worry, I hadn't a cap to wear; so, "Hester," said I, to my other daughter, "go you." (That girl was always tidy, you might catch her when you would.) "Hester," said he, "how's your father?" "He's a trifle better to-day, Sir," she said, "and he sends his kind duty to you and my lady, and thanks you for all your kindness, (which he had done the day before.)" "Tell him to make haste and get well, says Sir Vere, or I shall be having his house ready first; and send up for all you want;" and he trotted away across the turf. He hadn't been gone two minutes, when we heard a horse's hoofs clattering like mad, down the road by Stourbrook Mill. So out we ran, I and Hester, and we saw his horse tearing on like anything frantic, and Sir Vere dragged along by the stirrup. We ran and screamed

for help, and the neighbours, too, and then the horse rolled over and over, and some one came up and cut the stirrup leather, and then some people came running across for a door or a shutter to take him home on. Hannah, hang an apron across the window, that lightning scorches my eyes !”

“ Mother, you are talking too much, you had better be still and rest.”

“ You know I can’t rest when it thunders: how the rain is beating in ! So, Miss, as I was saying, they took him home ; and the third day after, he died. I said to Hester he would, the dogs howled so in the kennel. Poor Richard never got rightly well, for all we thought he would ; he fretted so when master died ; and then they stopped his allowance. Sir Vere always gave his servants a trifle whenever they couldn’t work, and we thought that my lady would have kept it on, for she was civil enough to speak to ; we did hope, too, she would

have let us have the moral cottage, but we reckoned without our host. Well ! one day the steward came in ; I knew there was something he didn't like, by his settling himself in his chair. Richard, said he, do you and your family go to Church ? I've orders from my lady, she'll have no people but such as go to Church and sacrament. Now Richard and the girls went to Church, as the steward knew quite well, but I was brought up to chapel. I dare say, Miss, you never went to chapel yourself ; the gentlefolks seldom do. So I turned round sharp to the steward ; Give my duty to my lady, says I, and my soul's as much value to me, as her ladyship's is to her ; and I'll thank her to let me manage it my own way. I'm not likely to give your message, said he, for her ladyship don't favour me with orders herself ; I get them second-hand. But I'll give you a piece of advice. You'll find a new order of things set up,

and if you've any regard for Richard's place, you'll just conform like a sensible woman, and save your soul in my lady's new way. You'll find many to keep you in countenance. So he went.

"Well! I did keep from chapel a little while, poor Richard fretted so; I went to Mr. Leslie's church, for I've a great respect for him. And then there was weary and worry, because I didn't go to Marfield, and when Sacrament Sunday came round, even Richard said, "Anne, for the roof above you don't barter your salvation." In April my lady went abroad, and in June my husband died; and I got some money to pay the funeral, and warning to shift my quarters. I made no words about it, for I knew it was just no use. So I sold what things I could do without, and came to live in Stourbrook. My girls couldn't get places at first, for Hester was too high for farmer's service, and Hannah too young and weakly. So we

got on a little as best we could, till winter came, and then we went into the silk-mills. Poor Hester picked up some bad ways there, as girls at factories will ; she took on with a man of the name of Dawson, who wasn't good for much. They had the overlooker's bad word, and when so many hands were paid off, three years ago come Christmas, they both got out of work. . So then he married her and took her off to London, for he was always a roving sort of man, and he said he could get employment there, and maybe make his fortune. . But its eighteen months since I had a letter, and the last was from Hester, in such altered writing.— Hannah ! the barley-water."


The visitor, who had listened in silence with her face turned from the light, now suddenly left her seat and walked to the open window. As Hannah came up to the bed, she stooped over her mother's ear : "For the love of God be silent ; it's my Lady !"

There was a moment's startled pause; and then they heard a gasping sort of sound like some one struggling for breath. With ready tact, Hannah turned away from the window, and busied herself in settling the bed; she heard the rain plash heavily down on the pavement underneath—she knew it drifted in at the window—yet the stranger took no heed. She turned round again after a little while, and came up to the bed-side.

"We all have our trials," said she, "and that should make us merciful one to another. They say God will be merciful to us if we are, and we all need so much mercy. I will come and see you again by-and-by. I am a friend of Mrs. Leslie's."

* * * * *

* * * About half an hour later, Agatha entered the Vicarage parlour; Millicent was there, wrapped up in her large shawl, and watching the pelting storm as it drifted past the windows. She thought of that little



new-made grave, in the lonely, damp church-yard ; how desolate it would look the live-long night, whilst she was sitting by her own hearth-side, or lying in her own warm bed. She wished she could go all alone, and watch there a little while : for that tiny grave was more to her just then than all who were left behind.

“ Good gracious, Agatha ! ” she cried, “ are you ill ? ” And as fast as her short, quick breathing would permit, she went to her cousin, and took off her dripping things.

“ Never mind me, Milly, I shall be better directly ; don’t speak to me kindly just now.”

Millicent was one of those women whose sorrow is never selfish ; it never occurred to her that the claims of others were fewer, because she had an aching at her heart, with which they had nothing to do. A pliant reed, she bent so low, the rudest blast could not snap her ; and when it was past, she raised her head, a little more drooping than

before, and went about her work, with a faith that nothing could shake, a patience that nothing could weary.

She saw that Agatha did not wish to be noticed just then, and turning away, cleared the things from the little round table, placed Cameron's large Bible by his chair, put Annie's little hymn-book in its place, and then sat down to make the usual notes in the class-book of the Sunday-school ; just as she had done so many quiet Sundays, and as she hoped to do, please God, till that long, long Sabbath should begin, when those who have been faithful over a few things shall enter into the joy of their Lord.

A few minutes later, her husband and child came home.

"Milly !" cried Cameron, as he crossed his threshold, (that was always his first cry ;) but he did not call Milly as he used to, quite ; he called in an anxious, impatient tone, as if he almost feared he might call

some day and Millicent would not come. But she did come, just as usual, and he looked relieved and pleased, and told her to go back directly, and not stand there in the cold; and she drew her shawl a little closer, and went upstairs, just coughing now and then, to that nursery which looked so empty; and attended to her little girl. Presently she returned, looking very pale, and came up to Agatha's chair.

"Dear Agatha, don't answer if you'd rather not—Annie tells me you went to the Daltons. Don't be angry; we often meant to speak about it, but we did not know how much you knew; and my letters—I know there was some mistake—I wrote some you never noticed. For God's sake, don't look so ghastly! Let me fetch you a glass of wine."

"Not now, I am just going home; I'm not afraid of the rain, the walk will do me good—another evening, Milly dear, if God bear with me so long."

CHAPTER XIII.

"Nur wenn das Vertrauen bricht,
Geht man unter; eher nicht."—GERMAN POEM.

ARCHDEACON FLEMING sat in his study, in his easy chair, looked over some memoranda, and compared them with letters, which lay on the table before him; some of these were from female correspondents, amongst others a note in a beautiful Italian hand:

"DEAR SIR,—I shall be happy to comply with your wishes, and attend you to-morrow at three o'clock, for the purpose of confession.

"Yours truly,

"AGATHA TEMPEST.

"THE PRIORY,

Friday Evening."

She would come then at last, that woman! He looked at his watch; in five minutes more! But she will not be punctual, those Brandons never are; and he went on comparing his memoranda. The church clock struck the hour; the chimes played the air of the 100th Psalm, a mediæval tune, composed by one Martin Luther. The Archdeacon had a good ear for music, and he was still in the act of listening with pleased attention, when a shadow passed quickly across the window. He leaned back in his easy chair, and took up a volume of the Fathers; he heard the timid tinkle of the door-bell, the steps of his servant on the oil-cloth, the opening and shutting of the door. Then, as his visitor entered the room, and the door was closed behind her, he laid down his book, and pronounced a short form of benediction. She bent her head whilst he did so; then coming forward a few paces, she folded her arms and bent her head again. "Business at once!"

thought the Archdeacon. He looked at her a moment as if partly expecting her to kneel; she might have done so with privacy and comfort, for the curtain of the window was slightly drawn, and a hassock was placed all ready, but she did not, and he would not press the subject then.

“ My Daughter,” he said, “ I am glad to see you here. I wished to have some little conversation, that in case you have any doubt or perplexity on your mind; they may all be removed before receiving the Holy Eucharist. Has anything happened to bewilder or harass you lately ? ”

“ Much, my Father.”

“ For instance, you have seen the worship of God conducted in a manner that has startled you; you have heard some opinion advanced that has raised up doubts in your mind ? ”

“ I have never attended public worship except in your Church at Marfield; I have

never been present at Mr. Leslie's family prayers, nor spoken with him on any subject which Ernest and you forbid."

"Well!" said the Archdeacon drily, in a tone which implied "go on."

"I have been a good deal perplexed by the difference between duties and good works."

"Good works are duties; what do you mean?"

"I cannot explain myself clearly. I will try to describe what I mean. When my husband died, I neglected all my duties; I never thought of his labourers and tenants, I wished to lie down and die too. I went away from Marfield and left them to their fate; and so I was the means of trifling with one immortal soul."

"On that point you may make your conscience easy; if I understand my Diocesan rightly, the cure of the souls at Marfield is my concern, not yours."

“ But she was sent away from Marfield, (her name was Hester Dalton,) and she was driven to the factory at Stourbrook, and fell into bad ways. That was because I neglected my duties, and did not care for my poor. When I came home from abroad, Ernest taught me about good works, and I went about London doing good, under the reverend Mother’s care; and there in a garret, scarcely fit to lodge a brute, I waited one day on a dying woman, and that was Hester Dalton. Do you think the good work I did then would make up for what went before? For I have a sort of feeling sometimes, as if the mark of Cain were on me.”

“ My Daughter, exercise yourself daily in the habit of self-control; I have seen you once before in this excited state, in the presence of the holy Mother. You will abstain during the next few days from all sorts of stimulating food, and repeat the

penitential psalms every night before going to rest. In proportion as your temper becomes subdued, you will find your mind in a clearer state to appreciate your various duties. As concerns the case in point, I am happy to relieve you from your sense of guilt. You left your poor, as you call them, to the care of your brother Ernest, the proper person to be your agent, in every point of view."

"But surely I ought to have seen that the wishes of my husband were carried out?"

"And who more fit to do so than Mr. Brandon?"

"Do you really think he knew what those wishes were? Do you really think he strove to fulfil them as far as in him lay?"

The Archdeacon was so startled by the look she gave, that he was on the point of speaking the truth, but he checked the impulse directly.

“ You can hardly doubt, I suppose, that your husband’s desires were fulfilled as far as they were made known to Ernest. That they were made known, I will prove to you, by mentioning a fact you can scarcely be aware of. A letter was found directed to your brother, in the desk of the late Sir Vere. I have seen the letter myself; it contained instructions of all he wished in case of his demise, and expressed the most unlimited confidence. You were delirious at the time it was opened, and have so given way to excitement on the subject ever since, that Ernest has probably been silent.”

“ Did he really get that letter ? ” cried Agatha, ashy pale; “ then Ernest has indeed deceived me; my brother in whom I trusted. And if he deceives me in temporal things, do you think I can trust him with my soul ? ”

It just flashed across her as she looked at the Archdeacon, if she had uttered those

words in a convent, what her fate might have possibly been. But Agatha was not in a convent; she stood there on firm ground, as the Archdeacon saw when he got over the sensation that the floor of his study was giving way.

"What do you mean?" he inquired, shortly; for he had burnt the letter himself.

"I mean, I have a copy of that letter in my husband's own hand. I can repeat it word by word; it is always in my mind."

"Possibly; have the goodness to dismiss it for the present, we can talk over it at your leisure by-and-by. You are here for the purpose of confession; you will force me to remind you to proceed."

Agatha remained silent a few minutes.

"Oh, Archdeacon Fleming!" said she, mournfully, "God is witness how much I might confess, but are you sure you can absolve? Ernest bid me not argue, and

I was silent, but then I had faith in Ernest ; and now, he has deceived me ! ”

“ Let us come to a clear understanding. Are you here for the purpose of confession, or simply to argue my authority to pronounce in your presence the forms of absolution in our liturgy ? Perhaps you are confused by the similarity of ecclesiastical terms. I am an Archdeacon, not simply a Deacon.”

“ It is not that I mean ; but those whom I confess to, I pledge myself to obey in all things, and to submit to, even in my thoughts. Now I can always do what you will, but I cannot always think what you will ; and I think I have been misled.”

The livid hue of anger suppressed passed over the Archdeacon's brow.

“ You reserve to yourself the right to argue,” said he, calmly ; “ in a female it is not unnatural. Provided you argue with the proper parties, I am inclined to indulge

your wish. As you are no longer here in the character of a penitent, allow me to offer you a chair."

But Agatha drew slightly back.

"I cannot argue with you only," said she, "there are some who think so differently. You may be right, or they may; the word of God must be right, and by that I will judge what you have taught me. I partly came here to say so, in frankness, not in anger;" and Agatha turned to leave the room.

With a swiftness she was quite unprepared for, he stood between her and the door. He held the lock in his hand for a moment, as if to dispute her exit; then opening it to the widest,—“You came here under false colours,” he observed; “what is spoken under the seal of confession is usually understood to be sacred.”

“I never betray confidence,” said Agatha, proudly; and bowing low she left him.

Before the Archdeacon could recover breath, her shadow crossed the window again. He stood there for a moment, rigid, then sitting down, wrote a letter to Ernest Brandon.

CHAPTER XIV.

"A cloud lay cradled near the setting sun,
A gleam of crimson tinged its braided snow;
Long had I watch'd its glory moving on,
O'er the still radiance of the lake below.
Tranquil its spirit seem'd, and floated slow;
E'en in its very motion there was rest,
Whilst every breath of wind that chanced to blow
Wafted the traveller to the beauteous west;
Emblem, methought, of the departing soul,
To whose white robe the gleam of bliss is giv'n.

WILSON.

THE clock on the stairs had long struck midnight; there was no sound of footsteps, or exchange of voices, or creaking of doors; the day's work was over, and the household were at rest. The rain, which had fallen heavily during the early part of the night, subsided little by little; and the gentle pattering of occasional showers, and rustling of the wind among the trees, alone broke the

silence from without. Agatha sat by the fire in a large arm-chair; her long hair braided off her face, her eyelashes fringing her cheek, and her whole face cast in the marble mould of Madonna-like repose. The night lamp at her elbow threw its rays full upon her, whilst a screen placed behind it cast a shade over the rest of the room; the curtains of the bed were drawn aside, and the folds of the quilt in the deep shadow gave the indistinct outline of a recumbent form.

That form was Millicent. She was very ill; the doctors said she was sinking. Cameron's heart sank too when he heard it, and felt all the power of his athletic frame, and the strong superabundance of his health; and thought what a life his would be when she was gone, and, in human calculation, what a long one. With a stern acquiescence he went about his daily labours, whilst the flower which had bloomed so lovingly along

the straight and narrow path he had chosen was gradually withering away.

Millicent sank very slowly; you only knew it as one by one she failed in her little duties. Such little duties they were, and yet what a difference it made when there was no Millicent at hand to perform them!—when her step grew slower and heavier, and then failed altogether, and her voice was silent about the house, and her short, sharp cough was confined to her own room! The current of her life had run so even; she had known so few events beyond those daily recurring duties; the care of her household, and the care of her children, and the steady, faithful kindness to all who were in trouble or in need. Who would have thought what a difference there would be when Millicent was gone? But there she lay, on that quiet bed, and the doctors said she was sinking.

It seemed strange to her at first, to lie

there so useless and passive, and hear of all the doings of the world without, as of something she had left behind ; and stranger still, as she grew worse and worse, to find herself the single object of all that little household. How things went on without her below stairs she never could understand, and to see them put out of their way, in such an inconceivable manner, for a little accommodation to herself, surprised her almost more than she could express. She got used to it by-and-by, and then it became an inexpressible comfort, whenever she opened her eyes, at all hours of the day or night, to find some anxious, wakeful friend, with nothing to do but to attend to her wants and wishes. She was very unworthy of it all she knew, but there was nothing for it but faith and patience ; so she trusted her soul to her Saviour, and bore her sufferings quietly. Hers would never be a death-bed of triumph, she often told Agatha that ;

but the death-bed of a lost sheep ransomed. It pleased her, as she lay awake that night, to watch Agatha's face in sleep; whatever her troubles or cares might be, they never intruded on her slumbers; so soon as she slept they were left behind, and her countenance became that of a wearied child. It carried back Millicent's mind to those olden days, when Ernest and Agatha Brandon were the playmates of her own quiet childhood. How differently their lot had been cast! What were her trials compared to theirs? What a fiery furnace had Agatha been called to pass through; and Ernest, poor Ernest! Her thoughts reverted with mournful kindness to the faithful lover of her youth, the only living human being to whom she had knowingly caused a pang. God would be merciful, she hoped, and bring him home at last, but now she could only pray for him as one "who had erred and been deceived."

They had had many letters from him lately, which had caused them much anxiety. At first, he had talked of a life of seclusion in vague and indefinite terms, as of a possible ultimate measure; but latterly, his letters had been more decisive. There was much discontent in his parish, much wrangling and dispute among even the staunchest church-goers; the sudden innovations he made in their manner of worship, by way of introduction to the spirit of unity and concord; the reforms he introduced to do away with the Reformation, and the new fashions he set up to instil a veneration for antiquity, were a little too quick for the stiff-necked generation he had to deal with. In fact, he bungled the matter, as Fitzherbert said he would. He was grieved at that, for he was by nature a man of peace, and he gave up and gave away largely to reconcile his parishioners; and they took what he had to give, and were not recon-

ciled, for he gave in the wrong place. Then he executed dire judgment on the body of a refractory parishioner, whose soul he really hoped was in heaven, but whose baptism, some half century previous, had not been according to the established rites of the Church he had latterly attended. And Ernest gained his point, for the man was not buried where he had wished to be, and his son wrote a letter in the county paper, which had very little to do with the funeral, but raked up all Ernest's most unguarded measures, and brought them before the public. So the Bishop was obliged to come forward, and being considerably bored at the fact, did so in no gentle mood. And Ernest chafed and fretted, and threw up the living of St. Chads. It reverted to the gift of the Archdeacon and Committee, and was presented to a nephew of the former, who had lately taken Holy Orders. And Ernest said he would go abroad, and enter

an institution in the communion of the Romish Church. Poor fellow! It might have given him comfort to know how Millicent thought of him that night. One by one the clock on the stairs struck the hours of approaching morning; a keen autumnal chill crept in despite the fire, and Agatha roused from time to time, and heaped on more coals.

"Agatha," said Millicent at length, "open the shutters, and let me look out."

The day was beginning to dawn; the rain of the preceding night had refreshed the vegetation, and tints of autumn looked beautiful among the hardly diminished foliage. They watched the sun, as little by little it threw off its veil of mist, casting the loveliest contrasts of light and shade on the old trees round the Vicarage. How many a long day and night of illness since her marriage had Millicent lain there and watched those trees! From the earliest

symptom of verdure to the last withered leaf, quivering in the fantastic shadows of moonlight, and bathed in the hot glare of noon; tossing their branches in the wind, and motionless, without so much as the trembling of a leaf; even when their long boughs were brown and bare, with a light fringe of snow nicely balanced on each, she had lain there and watched them fondly. They were like old familiar faces; Millicent loved those trees.

“Dear Agatha,” she said, “I have been thinking so much about you lately. Just promise me one thing. The worst is past for you; trials like yours don’t come over twice. Just do what comes to hand whilst the day goes by, and leave to-morrow to God.” She paused, and seemed to struggle a little for breath; as Agatha raised her head, she saw a change come over her face. She appeared to wish to speak, but the words came slowly, at intervals. “We must bear

our little burden through our own appointed day. 'Be not weary in well doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.' 'He is faithful who has promised.'—'When thou passest through the waters,—I will be with thee, and through the floods,—they shall not overflow thee.'—Oh, Agatha! call my husband."

Agatha saw what was going to happen; in a minute, no one knew how, the house was roused. As if by magic, Cameron stood there—pale, haggard, and icy cold. The servants huddled weeping behind the door, not daring to intrude; and the child slept calmly on,—for no one dared be the one to awake the child.

With a dying effort Millicent threw her arms round her husband, and rested her head upon his shoulder. "Pray for my soul," she cried, "pray for my soul; it is passing away, and I am a sinner."

And Cameron raised her in his arms, and

looking upward, held her there, as if in the act of sacrifice. And there, as the last earthly vapour passed away, and the glorious autumn sun poured its rays into the room of death, he commended the soul of his one dear treasure to Him who had given, and now would take away; unto Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood!

"He is faithful who has promised," whispered Millicent; "oh, how faithful!" And she nestled her head a little closer, and seemed to fall asleep.

And there lay her Bible with its marker in its place, and the fruit she had partly tasted, and the row of phials carefully arranged, that never would be wanted now.

And the world woke up, and went its way, for another day had begun: and hour

after hour, overhead, Agatha heard the heavy, unceasing tread, which spoke of the strong man's struggle.

FINIS.

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